COMBAT

Korea 1950

US Marine VERSUS North Korean Soldier

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Illustrated by Johnny Shumate

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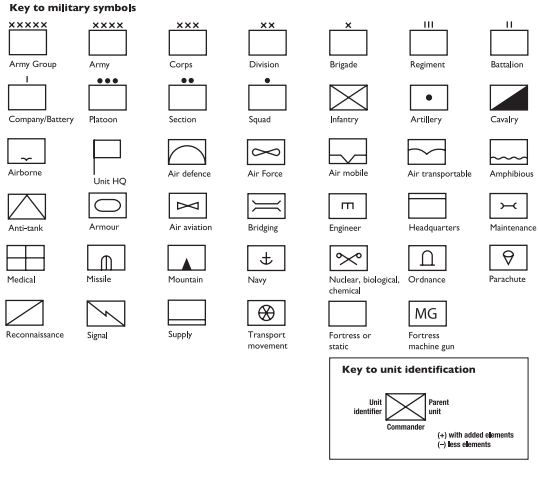

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Introduction

BELOW LEFT
Preceded by artillery bombardments and spearheaded by T-34-85 medium tanks, the NKPA invasion force struck across the 38th Parallel in the early-morning hours of June 25, 1950, taking both US intelligence and the ROK Army defenders almost entirely by surprise. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 37029)

BELOW RIGHT
Opposing the NKPA invasion, the ROK Army had roughly 140 antitank guns, including just a handful of these 57mm M1 guns. (NARA)

In 1910, after its crushing defeat of Tsarist Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) had stunned Europe, the Empire of Japan decided to seize Korea. With the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1910, Japan annexed all of Korea as a colony, ruled with absolute power by a Japanese General Government whose ultimate goal was the "Japanization" of Korea. While Western observers noted the expansion of Korea's modern infrastructure under Japanese rule, they did not seem to see or care that the country's resources were being exploited solely for the benefit of the Empire of Japan. With World War II and its insatiable demands, even the Korean people themselves, male and female, became little more than resources for Japan to exploit.

In 1942, the tide of war turned against Japan and it had to go on the defensive as the lands it had conquered were slowly taken back. Although one of the "Big Three" Allies, the Soviet Union did not declare war on Imperial Japan until August 8, 1945, three months after the surrender of Nazi Germany and two days after the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Historians Lynn Montross and Nicholas Canzona, authors of the official US Marine Corps history of the Korean War, succinctly explained why the Korean peninsula has been fought over for centuries: "Korea is one of those tragic areas of the earth's surface which are destined in all ages to be a doorstep of strategy. As the focal point of the China–Russia–Japan triangle, the peninsula offers each of these powers a threshold for aggression against either of the other two. Possession of Korea has been for centuries an aim of aspiring conquerors in the Far East, and all three rival nations have had a turn" (Montross & Canzona 1954: 3). The mountainous nature of the Korea peninsula's terrain – US forces are depicted here outside of Miryang – would lead to continual battles for the possession of high ground, from which the enemy could be observed over long distances. Air power was quickly brought to bear against the NKPA invasion by the US 5th Air Force stationed in Japan. Experienced pilots in high-performance aircraft such as the Vought F4U Corsair fighter-bomber, carrying a heavy payload of weaponry including wing-mounted 20mm cannon, 5in rockets, bombs, and napalm canisters, swiftly won air superiority over the Korean peninsula – but air power alone proved incapable of stopping the advance of NKPA forces. (NARA)

The last-minute participation of the Soviet Red Army in the Pacific Theater lasted little more than a week and the major objective seems to have been occupying and plundering Manchuria. In a halfhearted, last-minute attempt to keep Soviet expansion in check, American officials arbitrarily divided Korea along the 38th Parallel as a matter of administrative convenience. Soviet forces would take the surrender of Japanese military units north of the line while US forces would do the same south of it. After an interim Allied occupation, free Korean elections were to be held. Almost before the ink was dry on the Japanese surrender papers, however, the Soviets sealed off the new border.

After decades of Japanese oppression, the Korean people soon clamored for self-determination. In the south, United Nations (UN)-supervised elections were held in May 1948, electing Syngman Rhee as president of the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea). The Soviets boycotted these elections and held their own on August 25, 1948, from which all international observers were banned, installing their chosen candidate Kim Il-sung, noted for being an anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter, as premier of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea).

Even though virtually all of Korea's heavy industry lay north of the 38th Parallel, with very few exceptions all of the equipment needed by the rapidly expanding *In Min Gun* (North Korean People's Army; NKPA) came from the Soviet Union. In 1948, the departing Red Army occupation troops left behind large quantities of weapons, ammunition, and equipment. The

The Korean War in 1950

During much of 1950, virtually the entire Korean peninsula was a battlefield at some point as the tide of war shifted dramatically back and forth. North Korea launched its well-planned and -prepared invasion across the 38th Parallel on June 25. By August, the NKPA had overrun 90 percent of South Korea and pushed ROK and US Army forces back into a small, desperately held enclave in the southeast corner of the peninsula known as the Pusan Perimeter. In September, a stunningly successful UN counteroffensive began with a surprise amphibious assault on the west-coast city of Inchon, which severed supply lines of NKPA units in the south, followed by a UN breakout from the Pusan Perimeter. By December, UN forces were racing north and had overrun most of North Korea, with some US Army and ROK units reaching the Yalu River, the border with the People's Republic of China. At this point, China came to North Korea's aid and by January 1951 had committed some 400,000 troops to the struggle for Korea.

following year, the Soviet Union granted North Korea the equivalent of US $40m in credit to purchase Soviet arms. There were "bond drives" to buy more and taxes on peasants' crops rose to 60 percent. With the aid of some 3,000 well-qualified Soviet military advisors, the NKPA was patterned after the Soviet model and received excellent Soviet-made artillery, aircraft, and tanks. By 1950, the NKPA was the best-equipped military force on the Asian mainland after the Soviet Union itself.

Without a great deal of apparent enthusiasm, the United States began to equip and train the fledgling *Daehanminguk Yuk-gun* (Republic of Korea Army; ROK Army) under the tutelage of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) – US Army officers and NCOs who actually answered to the US State Department. Fearful of Rhee's fiery anti-Communist rhetoric, US politicians in Washington, DC made the deliberate decision to keep the ROK Army small and ill-equipped so that Rhee would not be tempted to use it offensively against North Korea. The end result was that the ROK Army was also too weak to defend its own borders.

With US foreign policy concerning Korea seeming vague and indifferent to outsiders, Joseph Stalin eventually gave Kim Il-sung the green light for a swift Blitzkrieg-style invasion of South Korea in order to unite the entire Korean peninsula under the banner of Communism. In the early-morning hours of June 25, 1950, the concussive roar of massed artillery fire heralded a sweeping surprise invasion of South Korea by nearly 100,000 NKPA troops.

South Korea called upon the UN for help. With the benefit of the Soviet Union boycotting the organization in a moment of pique, the United Nations Security Council denounced the invasion by North Korea, authorizing a United Nations Command (UNC) to repel it and calling upon member nations to dispatch military forces to South Korea's aid. The UN empowered the United States to select the UNC commander-in-chief and the Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously chose General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, who was overseeing the post-World War II occupation and reconstruction of Japan from Tokyo.

USSR
Vladivostok
Tumen
Onsong
Yanji
CHINA
CHANGBAI MOUNTAINS
Aoji
Musean
Rashin
Tumen
Chongjin
December 1950: Farthest limit of advance by UN forces
Hyesan
Changjin
Jian
Kanggye
Kilchu
HAMGYONG MOUNTAINS
Chosan
Yalu
NORTH KOREA
Chonsong-ou
Iwon
Unsan
Chongchon
Taedong
Hamhung
Hongwon
Chongju
Kun-ri
Tokchŏn
Hungnam
Anju
Sunchŏn
Sukchŏn
Songchŏn
Wonsan
Korea Bay
Sea of Japan
Pyongyang
Tongchon
Nampo
Imjin
July 1953: Armistice Line
Sariwon
Pyonggang
TAEBAEK MOUNTAINS
Kaesong
Haeju
Yangyang
38th Parallel
Kansong
Panmunjom
Chunchon
Munsan
Seoul
Bukhan
SOUTH KOREA
Inchon
Han
Suwon
Osan
Chungju
Chonan
Chongju
Naktong
Yongdok
Kum
Taejon
SOBAEK MOUNTAINS
August 1950: Farthest limit of advance by NKPA forces
Yellow Sea
Pohang
Kunsan
Taegu
Chonju
Kyongju
Nam
Yongjam
Kwangju
Masan
Pusan
Koje-do
Mokpo
Yosu
Western Channel
Korea Strait
JAPAN
Tsushima
Hiroshima
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Fukuoka
Cheju-do
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The Opposing Sides

ORIGINS

NKPA

The NKPA had grown swiftly and achieved a great deal in a rather short time, but preparations for its formation had been laid long before it officially came into being in February 1948. Soon after the Soviet Red Army occupied northern Korea in 1945, local Communist "police" forces such as the Red Guards were formed and these quickly grew into provincial police "Peace

Soviet-run elections held in North Korea on August 25, 1948 saw the election of Kim Il-sung as the first premier of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Here, Kim personally test-fires one of the first 7.62mm Type 49 submachine guns in December 1948. A licensed copy of the World War II Soviet PPSh-41 *Papasha* ("Daddy"), the Type 49 was a matter of national prestige as the first military small arm to be manufactured domestically in North Korea. Although the vast majority of Korea's existing industry lay north of the 38th Parallel, North Korea was only able to manufacture some of its own small-arms ammunition and the Type 49. All other weapons had to be acquired from the Soviet Union. (API/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

Future NKPA machine-gun crews receive training on the Soviet 7.62mm Degtyaryov DPM light machine gun, the NKPA's standard Squad Automatic Weapon. The DPM itself was quite good, but use of the fully rimmed 7.62×54mmR cartridge necessitated a large, flat, circular 47-round pan magazine that was awkward to handle and susceptible to damage. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Guardians" that were in turn swiftly taken under national control. In January 1946 a Central Party Peace Preservation Officers' Training School was created as a front for what would become the Pyongyang Military Academy, its graduates going into senior positions in the Constabulary, and three more schools were added in 1947. Later that year, a sizable Railway Constabulary was organized to train more future military personnel. To fill the ranks, Democratic Youth League Training Centers were established in every North Korean province to indoctrinate and train older school-age boys. All men between the ages of 17 and 40 were required to undergo basic military training.

The North Korean government announced the creation of the People's Army on February 8, 1948, although the last three Peace Preservation Officers' Training Schools had already become the 1st and 2nd Infantry divisions and the Independent Infantry Brigade in September 1947. The Independent Infantry Brigade became the 3rd Infantry Division by the end of 1948 and a 4th Infantry Division was formed the following year. Approximately 7,000 well-qualified Soviet Red Army advisors worked with the North Korean government to build an effective conventional army.

While the NKPA's materiel support came from the Soviet Union, a rather large percentage of its manpower came from the neighboring People's Republic of China. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (CPLA) had employed regiments and even entire divisions of ethnic Korean-speaking troops to fight in the recent Chinese Civil War (1945–49). Having successfully defeated the Nationalists in 1949, Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong was able to release these troops to bolster the NKPA with seasoned combat veterans. In total, some 30,000 combat-tested Korean-speaking veterans of the CPLA entered the ranks of the NKPA in 1949 and 1950, enough to meet the manpower requirements of three divisions. They provided roughly one-third of the troops with which the NKPA went to war in 1950, and a solid backbone of veterans with many years of combat experience.

COMBAT

Sergeant, 18th Regiment, 4th Division

To increase close-range firepower in the assault, the NKPA had one or two submachine-gunners at the infantry-squad level and one 83-man submachine-gun assault company per regiment. This NCO is a submachine-gunner of the NKPA's 18th Regiment serving in the 4th Division, a unit which had earned the honorific title of "Seoul Division" for its part in the capture of the capital city of South Korea. He is physically hard and lean because since that battle he and his comrades had advanced nearly 300km on foot with little rest and dwindling supplies to participate in the all-out attacks to breach the thin defensive lines of the Pusan Perimeter – the last UN toehold on the entire Korean peninsula.

Hill 342, August 7, 1950

Weapons, dress, and equipment

This man carries the Soviet all-metal 7.62mm PPS M-43 "Sudaev" submachine gun (**1**) with a curved 35-round box magazine of 7.62×25mm Tokarev pistol ammunition, a weapon initially supplied in considerable numbers by the Soviet Union but replaced by Soviet- and North Korean-produced versions of the PPSh-41 submachine gun as the war progressed. Most infantrymen also carried two Soviet-made F-1 fragmentation grenades (**2**).

He wears the standard lightweight cotton summer uniform of the NKPA, with the tunic (**3**) patterned after the Soviet "*gymnasterka*"-style blouse. The loose-fitting, somewhat baggy trousers (**4**) are well reinforced with extra fabric on the knees and seat and are fastened at the ankles with tapes. The leather belt was a standard item, as were the light enlisted field boots (**5**) with canvas uppers and rubber soles. Although some NKPA units and branches were issued with Soviet Ssh-40 steel helmets, most infantrymen wore only the brimmed cloth field cap (**6**) with a red-star emblem on the front and a folding neck shade in the rear. Both hat and shirt were often fitted with loops of heavy string sewn in a zigzag pattern to allow the wearer to camouflage himself quickly and easily with natural foliage.

Field gear was minimal. A four-pocket magazine pouch (**7**) made of heavy canvas is attached to the leather belt and further secured with a shoulder strap. Field rations consisted largely of rice, millet, or cornmeal, carried in a long sock-like "rice sack" (**8**) tied at the ends and draped over one shoulder. The canteen (**9**) was carried in a cloth pouch with its own shoulder strap. A canvas rucksack (**10**) carried the rest of his meager belongings. On average, the North Korean infantryman of 1950 carried only 26lb of gear on the march.

US Marine Corps

In 1950, the United States Marine Corps celebrated its 175th birthday, having originally been established on November 11, 1775. Since that time the Corps had established a long history of success in battle, proud traditions all its own, and a strong *esprit de corps*. The Corps had served well in France in World War I, and World War II had seen the organization grow to new levels as it prosecuted the war against Imperial Japan in Asia and the Pacific on land, at sea, and in the air. Many new names were added to US Marine Corps and American history: Guadalcanal, Peleliu, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima. By 1945, the US Marine Corps had reached an all-time peak strength of 473,000.

With the end of World War II, the armed forces of the United States were demobilized and drawn down in typically rapid and often chaotic American postwar fashion. Generally speaking, the American people desired a return to peacetime norms, reduced defense spending, and a balanced federal budget. Military budgets had already been greatly reduced when, in March 1948, President Harry S. Truman appointed an old political colleague, Louis A. Johnson, as the new Secretary of Defense. Johnson quickly began slashing military budgets with a vengeance, and he seemed to bear an almost personal animosity toward the US Marine Corps in particular. Johnson's petty swipes at the Marines included forbidding them to celebrate the Corps' birthday and confiscating the official car used by Commandant of the Marine Corps General Clifton B. Cates. More ominously, the Corps was reduced to a strength of only 74,000 men worldwide and only ten understrength organized combat battalions; and just prior to North Korea's invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950, Johnson announced a further reduction to just six battalions.

The 1st Marine Division could not have been brought up to strength and reactivated in time for the Inchon landings without the call-up of Marine Reserves. Here, reservists from Seattle, Washington, disembark from buses en route to their transport ships. A clever US Marine Corps press officer touted them as "The Minutemen of 1950." (NARA)

The backbone of the 11th Marine Regiment was the 105mm M2A1 howitzer, with three artillery battalions each equipped with 18 of these guns. The standard US Army and Marine Corps light towed field howitzer during World War II and the Korean War, the rugged and reliable M2A1 could hurl a 33lb HE shell to a maximum range of 12,000yd; its high-trajectory fire was particularly valuable in the mountainous terrain of Korea. (SC 347107 courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command)

In both the White House and the Department of Defense there was open talk of "Unification" – doing away with the US Marine Corps entirely and absorbing the remnants into the regular US Army – which was tacitly approved by President Truman himself, who had removed Commandant of the Marine Corps General Alexander A. Vandergrift from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947. The proud US Marine Corps seemed on the verge of extinction.

These plans disappeared with North Korea's invasion. As the military situation on the ground deteriorated rapidly, by July 2, General MacArthur added a new request to his list of urgently needed reinforcements: a US Marine Corps regimental combat team (RCT) with supporting air group. The 1st Provisional Marine Brigade was hastily formed at Camp Pendleton, California, where the 1st Marine Division existed as a virtual "shadow" organization with only the 5th Marine Regiment operational. It too was badly understrength, so active-duty Marines from more than 100 duty stations across the United States were urgently ordered to Camp Pendleton by plane, train, bus, and car. Even this quick influx was only sufficient to bring the existing rifle companies up to full strength by replacing the missing rifle platoon in each; each rifle battalion in the regiment would, for the time being, remain short of one of its rifle companies. On numerous occasions this lack of assets would have dire consequences. Similar contortions were performed at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) El Toro, California, to flesh out three squadrons to form Marine Aircraft Group 33 (MAG-33).

While the manpower shortage would take considerable time and effort to overcome, the Marines had an ace in the hole when it came to equipment. In the chaotic weeks of demobilization after World War II, the US Marine Corps had grabbed every vehicle it could lay its hands upon and shipped them, along with other equipment, to the vast Marine Corps Depot of Supplies (MCDS) at Barstow, California, where they were reconditioned and mothballed. This supply pool at MCDS Barstow had become the "bank" from which the Corps could draw vehicles and supplies in time of need, and the foresight paid off in 1950. By such expedients and round-the-clock efforts, an RCT was formed and loaded out in just four days and prepared to sail for Korea in six.

COMBAT

Rifleman, 5th Marine Regiment

This rifleman belongs to the 5th Marine Regiment of the hastily assembled and understrength 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, which had been rushed to Korea to help stem the tide of the relentless and successful NKPA invasion that had conquered nearly 90 percent of South Korea. The Marines were sent directly into combat against a tough, battle-hardened opponent in steep, mountainous terrain and sweltering summer heat.

Hill 342, August 7, 1950

Weapons, dress, and equipment

The United States Marine Corps has a long-standing tradition that every Marine is a rifleman, and this man is armed with the .30-caliber M1 rifle (**1**), sometimes called the M1 Garand. This gas-operated semiautomatic rifle was rugged and reliable and gave stellar service in both World War II and Korea. This Marine is reaching into one of the ten pockets on his M1936 cartridge belt (**2**) for a fresh eight-round enbloc clip to reload his weapon. A six-pocket cotton bandoleer (**3**) worn over one shoulder holds an additional 48 rounds of clipped ammunition.

His dirty and sweat-stained olive drab M1942 pattern summer fatigue uniform (**4**) is made of a durable cotton weave pattern known as herringbone twill, considered to be one of the first "rip-stop" fabrics. The cover of his M1 "steel pot" helmet (**5**) and the rolled shelter-half on his pack have the dappled "beach" camouflage pattern unique to the US Marine Corps. The canvas leggings (**6**) worn over the brown leather "boondocker" N1 field shoes were not well-liked and usually faded to a yellow color, leading NKPA soldiers to refer to the Marines as "Yellow-legs."

On his right hip he has a canvas M1944 three-pocket grenade pouch (**7**) designed to hold Mk IIA1 fragmentation hand grenades. On his left hip a "Jungle First Aid Pouch" (**8**) is attached to his cartridge belt, as are two metal 1-quart canteens (**9**) in their carriers toward the rear on each side. On his back he wears an M1941 haversack (**10**) to which is attached a "horseshoe" bedroll wrapped inside a water-resistant US Marine Corps camouflage pattern shelter-half and an M1943 entrenching tool. The M1 bayonet in its M7 scabbard was often carried vertically on the side of the pack so that it could be reached easily over the left shoulder.

TRAINING, ETHOS, AND DOCTRINE

NKPA

To train the volunteers and conscripts of the expanding North Korean military, the NKPA had constructed basic training centers capable of handling large numbers of enlisted soldiers in five major cities. Under the guise of a "Peace Preservation Officers' Training School," the Pyongyang Military Academy was first established in the fall of 1945 and expanded rapidly. Over the next few years, schools for officer-candidates and noncommissioned officers were added and basic training centers capable of handling large numbers of enlisted soldiers sprang up in five major cities: Pyongyang, Sinuiju, Yongampo, Nanam, and Hoeryong.

Prior to the war, a conscript received his initial military training in a two-month-long program at such basic training centers. There he learned military staples such as close-order drill, the manual of arms, calisthenics, and military discipline. Although essentially the same military subjects were supposed to be taught to all recruits, there was not a published universal NKPA-wide training curriculum to adhere to, so training might reflect the commanding officer's personal experiences. Although the greatest overall influence on the NKPA's organization and doctrine was Soviet, training conducted by CPLA veterans tended to lean more toward guerrilla warfare while those who had served in the Imperial Japanese Army might influence training after that model.

In the case of the NKPA, basic training also included political lectures, with major emphasis placed on political indoctrination. Those men who showed the most promise during this initial training could be selected to go on to an officer-candidate or noncommissioned officer school, or to attend a central branch technical school to learn specialties such as engineering, communications, artillery, armor, or political instruction. Political officers and NCOs not only had their own technical branch but also their own chain of command outside

The US Army learned the hard way that the North Korean soldier was a tough, motivated, and well-armed opponent led by officers and NCOs with a great deal of prior combat experience. Colonel Lee Jong Kan, a regimental political officer in the NKPA's 26th Division, explained that he and his fellow commissars educated the rank and file with Marxist-Leninist ideology and promoted morale, revolutionary spirit, and discipline down to the individual level. Like the Chinese, the NKPA also stressed the superiority of man over machine via superior fighting spirit (Peters & Li 2004: 78–79). North Korea's official history of what is known as the Just Fatherland Liberation War explained: "The Party helped servicemen recognize the righteous character and objective of the war and educated them in the spirit of socialist patriotism and iron discipline, and in an unbending revolutionary spirit" (Research Institute 1981: 39–40.) (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 1379)

of normal military channels. After such additional training, the men would be assigned to appropriate units and positions within the NKPA's infantry divisions. As with all new soldiers sent to operational divisions, their training continued for some time under regimental or battalion cadres, integrating them as unit members by means of squad, platoon, and eventually company-sized field exercises and maneuvers and, in some cases, more advanced weapons training.

One major stumbling block to all NKPA (and ROK Army) training was the very low literacy rate among Korean men of military age. What little formal schooling most Koreans could receive under Japanese occupation emphasized becoming good "imperial citizens" above all else. With the majority of recruits being illiterate, however, printed manuals were of little use so most training had to be done by verbal instruction, example, and repetition. Quite often, the best and brightest recruits and those with secondary educations were taken from the military ranks to be groomed as political officers. This made the shortage of educated candidates for technical military schools and officer leadership training even more acute.

Constant tough physical conditioning and frequent, strenuous long marches across rough and mountainous terrain were central elements of both basic training and operational unit service. Infantrymen were expected as a matter of routine to be able to route-march at least 30km (19 miles) in an eight-hour day. Forced marches were expected to cover 45km (28 miles) in a 10–12-hour day by alternating between running and marching. Stamina was as important as speed and these paces could be maintained for days on end during an advance.

ABOVE LEFT
Dating from 1950, this North Korean propaganda poster states, "Officers and soldiers of the People's Army, wreak vengeance upon the enemies!" (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT
Although the NKPA's military campaign was very successful, there was a large political flaw in its prewar planning. The commissars predicted that the NKPA would be joyously greeted in South Korea as liberators and that the invasion would ignite large-scale Communist guerrilla uprisings throughout the south. These events did not come to pass. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The rapid expansion of the NKPA on the eve of the war led to a marked reduction in the length and quality of training from top to bottom. In the late 1940s, peacetime officer-candidate training originally lasted as long as eight to ten months. By the spring of 1950, however, this had been reduced to only three months, and after the outbreak of the war it dwindled to a mere 30 days. NCO and technical training saw similar drastic reductions. For enlisted men conscripted after June 1950, training could last from as little as two to three days to as much as four to six weeks, usually culminating with the firing of two or three rounds of live ammunition.

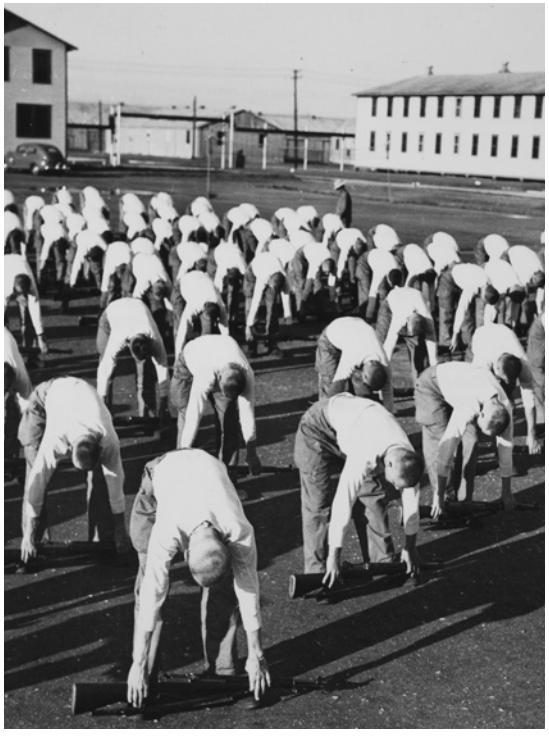
Infantry weapons training centered mainly on field-stripping, cleaning, and maintenance of said weapons. Some instruction on the basics of marksmanship was given, but actual shooting was almost universally restricted to "familiarization" fire of no more than five rounds of live ammunition, so the average NKPA rifleman was hardly a sharpshooter. US Marine Corps forces on the receiving end of North Korean fire judged NKPA small-arms fire to be great in volume but largely inaccurate, producing more of a demoralizing effect than actual casualties. Even the US Army, which was at a low point of its own in the matter, considered NKPA marksmanship training to be extremely limited.

Lee Young Ho was a 17-year-old high school student when Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, was captured in June 1950; he was snatched off the street to become a "volunteer" in the NKPA. The first chance he got, he deserted and fled south, eventually enlisting in the ROK Marine Corps, giving him a comparison by which to judge his NKPA basic training. He compared his three weeks of basic training to children's play as the recruits were only given hand-carved wooden dummy rifles to train with. At the completion of this basic training, ox-carts arrived with NKPA uniforms and Soviet rifles and the recruits were allowed to fire three rounds of live ammunition. With that, they were sent off to combat units (Peters & Li 2004: 189).

The NKPA had the traditional Communist dual system of both military and political officers down to at least company and sometimes platoon level, with the NKPA's apparatus more closely resembling the traditional Soviet-style *Politruk* (commissar) than the more lenient Chinese revolutionary model. All stages of a soldier's training and unit service included indoctrination and education in "moral–political relations." Many peasant soldiers were drawn to these commissars because they would help them learn to read using their political pamphlets.

Discipline within the NKPA was strict and immediate obedience was required; even the longtime veterans of Chinese service complained of its harshness. Although capital punishment was hardly an everyday occurrence, an NKPA officer could and occasionally did punish disobedience on the spot with a pistol bullet.

In the last months leading up to the June 25, 1950 invasion, NKPA divisions conducted large-scale field maneuvers that stressed mountain warfare and nighttime operations in particular. Expert camouflage techniques were practiced at all times on vehicles, equipment, fighting positions, and individuals. The NKPA's summer uniforms even included rows of zigzag horizontal stitching on the field caps and tunics that formed loops into which leaves and foliage could be inserted. Masterful camouflage, the use of decoys



and deceptions, and well-executed nighttime movements allowed even large NKPA units to survive and function tactically in the face of overwhelming UN air superiority.

US Marine Corps

All Marines had to attend the ten-week basic training "Boot Camp" at either the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in Parris Island, South Carolina, or San Diego, California. This was essentially the same course recruits underwent during World War II, but many believe that postwar boot-camp basic training sessions became tougher and stricter as the US Marine Corps sought to live up to its World War II reputation. Recruits either marched or sprinted wherever they went. Training included all the old staples: drill and ceremony, physical fitness, obstacle courses, classroom instruction, bayonet fighting, field sanitation, first aid, weapons maintenance, and endless inspections to make sure everything they did was done *exactly* to standard. Discipline was strict and drill instructors could still enforce it with a boot or fist if necessary, to ingrain the habit of moving *instantly* in response to an order. A rite of passage that all "boots" remembered was crawling beneath barbed wire while machine guns fired rounds of live ammunition just overhead.

Marines got only "familiarization" training with other weapons, such as throwing a live grenade or firing the BAR, but the M1 rifle was the center of a boot's very existence. Three of the trainee's ten weeks were spent on the rifle range, but in the first week not a single round was fired. The boots practiced "snapping-in" to each firing position until these stances were perfect and could be assumed quickly and flawlessly. Dry-firing taught them all of

ABOVE LEFT
Although otherwise well-equipped, NKPA infantry divisions in the field suffered from a dearth of effective antiaircraft weapons. Desperate to counter increasingly effective UN air attacks, some NKPA infantry divisions diverted the fire of 30–50 percent of their infantry small arms against attacking enemy aircraft. Here, soldiers aim Soviet 7.62mm Mosin-Nagant M1891/30 rifles and a DPM light machine gun. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 37024)

ABOVE RIGHT
Striving to live up to the excellent reputation the US Marine Corps had acquired during the Pacific campaigns of World War II, "Boot Camp" training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, South Carolina, remained just as tough – perhaps even tougher – in the late 1940s and early 1950s. (NARA)

This dramatic photograph taken during a training exercise, with F4U Corsair fighter-bombers roaring over US Marine Corps riflemen at extremely low altitude, shows the close coordination between Marines on the ground and in the air. The Corsair could carry a heavy payload of weaponry including wing-mounted 20mm cannon and underwing 5in rockets, bombs, and napalm canisters. The Marine in the foreground has a .30-caliber M1918A2 Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). The BAR's rear sight was graduated to a range of 1,500yd (for area targets) and the weapon's powerful .30-06 cartridge remained lethal at such distances. The BAR served in the Squad Automatic Weapon role and provided the firepower around which the remainder of the rifle squad could maneuver. While the US Army had moved to a smaller eight-man rifle squad built around a single BAR team, the Marines retained a larger 13-man rifle squad with two BAR teams. (NARA)

the small building blocks that combine to make an expert marksman: sight picture, sight alignment, breathing, trigger squeeze, follow-through. During the second range week, the boots put all they had learned to the test, firing first .22-caliber rimfire training rifles and then their M1s.

Week three was the high point of a boot's basic training, Qualification Week, and Record Day, when a boot fired "for the money" with his M1. The Qualification Course, with a maximum possible score of 250 points, required the recruit to engage targets at 200yd, 300yd, and 500yd from the standing, kneeling, sitting, and prone firing positions. The few men who failed to qualify with the minimum score of 180 were shunned and ridiculed while those who qualified as "Expert" were rewarded with a small monthly pay increase. Obviously, a man with the skills, ability, and confidence to hit a man-size target at 500yd was likely to be more effective in battle than one who had only fired his rifle two or three times.

All Marines underwent the same initial basic training even if they were to go on to become a clerk, cook, mechanic, or band member; to this day US Marine Corps tradition demands that every Marine is first and foremost a rifleman. Being a rifleman meant more than just having skill with one's personal weapon; the Marine also had to be grounded in the basic tactics and techniques of small-unit ground combat. This philosophy paid high dividends, particularly during the Korean War when the NKPA and later the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA) used night-infiltration techniques to attack support troops far behind the front lines.

Captain Francis I. "Ike" Fenton, Jr., was a much-decorated US Marine Corps officer who fought in three wars and retired as a colonel. His company in the 1/5 Marines was in the thick of the Korean fighting from Pusan to Chosin, and he emphatically and repeatedly attributed the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade's effectiveness to its well-trained men and NCOs:

> It was these noncommissioned officers that we can call the key to the success of Brigade operations … They were outstanding. Squad leaders knew their job to the last detail. Many times I ended up with sergeants as platoon leaders after a

> big fire fight, and they did an excellent job. I just can't be too high in my praise. In some cases, it wasn't just noncoms. It was the PFCs and privates holding the job of a fire team leader or squad leader. It was their fine leadership, outstanding initiative, and control of the men that turned a possible defeat into a sweet victory. (Fenton 1950: 55–56)

T.R. Fehrenbach, a veteran US Army officer, took special note of the professionalism and unique *esprit de corps* of the Marines as they arrived in Korea (Fehrenbach 1963: 147). He observed the strong leadership qualities of their officers and NCOs, and that the US Marine Corps as a whole had not lost sight of their true mission – to fight. Their training had been good and they were conscious of the standards a Marine must live up to.

ORGANIZATION, WEAPONS, AND TACTICS

NKPA

NKPA infantry divisions were "triangular," consisting of three infantry regiments, each of which in turn consisted of three infantry battalions. A battalion fielded three rifle companies, a heavy-machine-gun company, a mortar company, an antitank gun platoon, and an antitank rifle platoon, as well as the headquarters element, signal, medical, and supply platoons.

Each NKPA rifle company had a strength of about 150 men and consisted of a headquarters element, three rifle platoons, a heavy-machine-gun section, and a section of light mortars. The rifle platoon of about 45 men was divided into four squads. Each squad had its own Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) in the form of the 7.62mm Degtyaryov DP-28 or DPM light machine gun. NKPA rifles and machine guns were chambered for the standard Soviet 7.62×54mmR cartridge, a caliber originally adopted in 1891 but still in use today. The DP-28, attributable to the prolific Soviet arms designer Vasyli A. Degtyaryov and which entered Soviet Red Army service in 1928, was a gas-operated, air-cooled, bipod-mounted weapon the sheer simplicity of which made it extremely reliable and robust even under harsh battlefield conditions.

The majority of the squad were riflemen, armed with a version of the venerable 7.62mm Mosin-Nagant manually operated bolt-action rifle; NKPA weapons included the standard long (59in) M1891/30 rifle and the considerably shorter (40in) and lighter M1924/27 carbine. The Mosin-Nagant rifle's magazine held five rounds and could be reloaded quickly via the use of five-shot metal chargers or stripper clips; NKPA riflemen usually carried a bandoleer containing 100 rounds of ammunition in such clips. In some NKPA infantry divisions, one rifleman per squad was issued a Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle fitted with a 4× PE telescopic sight and acted as a designated marksman.

To give the squad additional close-range firepower in the assault, the squad leader and sometimes one or even two other squad members in well-equipped units were armed with submachine guns. In August 1950, US Marine Corps Intelligence reported a ratio of 162 submachine guns to 439 rifles in the average NKPA infantry battalion. Two types were provided by

The tried-and-tested Mosin-Nagant M1891 bolt-action rifle in its original configuration. (Armémuseum/ The Swedish Army Museum/ Wikimedia/CC0)

Modeled after Soviet Red Army infantry (rifle) divisions of World War II, NKPA infantry divisions had an artillery regiment equipped with 24 Soviet 76.2mm M1942 field guns, 12 76.2mm SU-76M self-propelled guns, 12 antitank guns, 36 antitank rifles, and 12 of these 122mm M1938 howitzers. North Korean artillery crews formed before the outbreak of the Korean War were well-trained, with at least one expert on the weapon as the core of the gun crew, and officer training at the pre-war artillery branch school lasted 16 months. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 37033)

the Soviets: the widely known wooden-stocked 7.62mm PPSh-41, which retained its Russian nickname of *Papasha* ("Daddy") within the ranks of the NKPA; and the lesser-known, all-metal 7.62mm PPS M1943 "Sudaev." Both weapons fired the 7.62×25mm Tokarev pistol cartridge. The *Papasha*, or a North Korean copy designated the Type 49, was the favored weapon with its large 71-round drum magazine (submachine-gunners usually carried one spare such magazine) and its higher cyclic firing rate of 900rd/min, which led American GIs and Marines to call it the "Burp Gun."

Later in the war, American troops became almost contemptuous of the shoddy Chinese stick grenades, which relied on blast alone, threw very little shrapnel, and had a dud rate of 1-in-3. The NKPA, however, was well-supplied with reliable and effective Soviet F-1 fragmentation hand grenades equivalent to the American Mk 2.

Heavy-machine-gun units were equipped with the old and rather heavy but still very reliable Soviet 7.62mm M1910 Maxim, a recoil-operated, water-cooled weapon with a cyclic firing rate of 500rd/min and feeding from 250-round belts of 7.62×54mmR ammunition.

The NKPA's infantry elements were well-supported by their own artillery assets, again in Soviet fashion. Each NKPA infantry division had its own artillery regiment, the standard armament being 12 122mm M1938 howitzers, 24 76.2mm M1942 field guns, 12 76.2mm SU-76M self-propelled guns, 12 antitank guns, and 36 antitank rifles. Divisional units were rounded out with a signal battalion, antitank battalion, engineer battalion, training battalion, and reconnaissance, transport, and supply companies. Additionally, each infantry regiment had six 120mm heavy mortars, four 76.2mm howitzers, and six 45mm antitank guns. Individual infantry battalions possessed nine 82mm medium mortars, two antitank guns, and nine antitank rifles, and each company in the best-equipped units had its own section of light mortars.

North Korean mortar crews were well-trained and American troops on the receiving end judged their fire to be very accurate. The NKPA tried to build heavy-weapons crews around one man who was truly an expert on said weapon. With observers on the high ground and preregistered fire, the mortar crews could lay heavy and accurate fire onto enemy positions whenever activity was observed. Light mortars sometimes varied between 50mm and 60mm tubes, but each infantry battalion had a mortar company with nine of these Soviet 82mm M1936 or M1937 medium mortars, either of which could fire a 6.75lb high-explosive bomb to a maximum range of 3,320yd. Photo Archives 2582)

Despite being otherwise well equipped, NKPA infantry divisions in the field were quite inadequately armed when it came to air defense. There were a few air-defense artillery battalions at corps level equipped with 37mm and 85mm antiaircraft guns, but these units were reserved to defend large static targets behind the front line. In the field, the infantry division's headquarters element, the three rifle regiments, and the artillery regiment each had a single antiaircraft machine-gun company, each being equipped with six Soviet 12.7mm DShK-38 heavy machine guns configured for antiaircraft use. Although the DShK-38 was (and still is) an excellent weapon, a total of just 30 such weapons to protect an entire NKPA infantry division was completely inadequate.

October 7, 1950: the wreckage of a bridge south of Suwon that was destroyed by the US Air Force. An NKPA T-34-85 medium tank, nearly 250 of which spearheaded the NKPA's offensive striking power, was caught on the bridge and put out of action. Soviet Red Army advisors included four generals considered to be experts in armored warfare, and some NKPA tank officers and mechanics went to the Soviet Union for training. Even in 1950, the T-34-85 was still a good tank that provided an excellent balance of firepower, protection, and mobility. (© CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

The majority of NKPA Maxim heavy machine guns were equipped with the Soviet M1931 "Universal" mount, which retained the wheels of the Sokolov mount for transport and weighed a hefty 77lb – 37lb more than the Maxim itself. With the M1931 mount, the wheels could be removed and the trail arms extended to form a tall antiaircraft mounting. Although rather old and heavy, the Soviet M1910 Maxim heavy machine guns used by NKPA units remained reliable and effective weapons. With the M1910 properly emplaced and sited, via minute adjustments of the traverse and elevation mechanism a machine-gunner could accurately place bursts of fire on a large area target, such as a hilltop, at ranges up to 3,900yd. (MoD MHIM HTM 48925)

The NKPA's most potent offensive weapon in the early months of the war was armor in the form of the excellent Soviet T-34-85 medium tank. Within a year, in Pyongyang the 15th Tank Training Regiment of 1948 grew into the 105th Tank Brigade, composed of the 107th, 109th, and 203rd Tank regiments, each equipped with 40 T-34-85s divided among three tank battalions, each with three four-tank companies; company, battalion, and regimental commanders each had their own personal tank. By the time of the invasion the tank brigade had become a tank division and the NKPA could muster a total of around 250 tanks between training and operational units. Tank regiments or battalions were attached to individual infantry divisions to spearhead their initial attacks.

Geared primarily for offensive combat, the basic NKPA attack called for one unit to demonstrate in front of the enemy, with all available organic and supporting firepower concentrated on the target to cover the rapid movement of infantry elements to one or preferably both flanks to culminate in a single, or preferably double, envelopment. In the early weeks of the war, the lack of effective enemy antitank weapons enabled the T-34-85 tanks spearheading the NKPA offensive simply to drive straight through UN defensive lines to penetrate deep and wreak havoc in the rear areas.

With the great victories of World War II still fresh in the mind, too many of the US Army personnel on occupation duty in Japan, through a combination of pride, ignorance, and racism, were openly contemptuous of NKPA forces before they encountered them in battle. This attitude went all the way to the top, to MacArthur who, on the second day of the war, said that if he were allowed to deploy his 1st Cavalry Division to Korea, the NKPA would immediately flee to the Manchurian border never to be seen again. A little over a month later, after the US Army had suffered a series of stinging defeats at the hands of the NKPA, there was widespread respect for this new enemy and its fighting capabilities.

North Korean military aviation units were also equipped with Soviet hardware. Here, a North Korean People's Air Force Ilyushin Il-10 ground-attack aircraft lies abandoned in a heavily damaged hangar at Kimpo Airfield, an important UN objective situated between Inchon and Seoul. The 5th Marine Regiment captured Kimpo Airfield on the evening of September 16, 1950. Four days later, the first US Marine Corps fighter squadron was operating from the field. (NARA)

US Marine Corps

The main fighting strength of a US Marine Corps infantry division was its three infantry regiments – in Korea the 1st, 5th, and 7th Marine regiments – each mustering around 3,500 officers and men. At full wartime strength, each infantry regiment was composed of three rifle battalions about 1,000 men strong, a 4.2in heavy mortar company, an antitank company equipped with 75mm recoilless rifles and 3.5in bazooka rocket launchers, and a headquarters and service company.

Each of the three rifle battalions was composed of three rifle companies, one weapons company, and one headquarters and support company. A rifle company had three rifle platoons, a light-machine-gun platoon, and a mortar section with three 60mm tubes. Each rifle platoon, with a strength of about 45 men, was divided into three 13-man squads; each squad was in turn divided into three four-man fire teams plus the squad leader. The rifle platoon headquarters team consisted of the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, guide, runner, radioman, and corpsman. The light-machine-gun platoon was equipped with six .30-caliber air-cooled Browning light machine guns. The rifle battalion weapons company had three heavy-machine-gun platoons, each manning six .30-caliber water-cooled Browning heavy machine guns, and a mortar platoon with three sections, each with two 81mm M1 medium mortars.

Although a few Marines, often members of the crew-served weapon teams, had .30-caliber M1 or M2 carbines, the Marine rifleman's best friend was his .30-caliber M1 rifle, a gas-operated semiautomatic weapon. Originally intended only to be a replacement for the .45-caliber M1911A1 semiautomatic pistol among heavy-weapons crews and support personnel, the 15-shot semiautomatic M1 and 30-shot select-fire M2 carbine fired the small, straight-cased .30 Carbine cartridge with a 110-grain bullet, with limited range and power.

In Korea, a version of the venerable .30-caliber Browning Automatic Rifle that had served the US military well in both World Wars, the M1918A2, continued to serve as the infantry's standard SAW. Commonly called the BAR, it was a solid, rugged, and reliable gas-operated automatic weapon, hindered somewhat in its SAW role by the use of detachable 20-round box magazines rather than belted ammunition. Many BAR gunners removed the weapon's

folding bipod; it snagged on brush in the assault, added 2.4lb in weight, and required the rifleman to assume a higher profile when firing. While the US Army had changed to smaller eight-man rifle squads, each built around a single BAR, the US Marine Corps had retained larger 13-man squads each of which included two BAR teams.

The 1st Marine Division's fourth regiment, the 11th Marine Regiment, provided its artillery element; it had four firing artillery battalions, each battalion fielding three six-gun batteries. Three battalions were equipped with the standard, venerable 105mm M101A1 howitzer, while the 4th Battalion was equipped with 18 155mm howitzers, also fielded in three batteries. Usually, one 105mm howitzer battalion would be assigned to the operational control of each infantry regiment. Although the 155mm M1 howitzer battalion was technically a divisional asset, depending on tactical conditions its batteries or even the entire battalion could be attached to a US Marine Corps infantry regiment. Depending on range, the fires of all Marine artillery units could be massed upon a single important target, or concentrated to break up an enemy attack.

Perhaps the most devastating weapons the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade brought with it to Korea were the Vought F4U-4B Corsair fighter-bombers of MAG-33. The F4U-4B was essentially the same as the F4U-4 used at the end of World War II, but its wing-mounted armament of six .50-caliber Browning heavy machine guns had been changed to four more potent AN-M2 20mm automatic cannon. Underwing hardpoints could mount up to 4,000lb of ordnance: 5in High Velocity Aircraft Rockets (HVARs), bombs of various sizes, and napalm canisters.

Yet it was not the aircraft themselves but the men and their training and experience that made Marine close air support so effective in Korea. Despite their successes during World War II, afterward the US Marine Corps went to work on correcting three key doctrinal issues they wanted to improve upon: air-to-ground coordination, fire-support coordination, and antitank defense. They were also experimenting with helicopters and the concept of "vertical envelopment."

Because the Japanese in World War II had fielded very little armor, the US Marine Corps realized it was not properly prepared to meet an opponent with good armored assets and so sought to achieve coordination of all arms in the antitank role: tanks, infantry, artillery, air assets, and engineers. Infantry antitank platoon weapons had been upgraded to include the new 75mm M20 recoilless rifle and the 3.5in M20 "Super Bazooka" rocket launcher. The 1st Provisional Marine Brigade's Company A, 1st Tank Battalion – the only active-duty US Marine Corps armored unit on the West Coast – drew new M26 Pershing tanks from MCDS Barstow before deploying to Korea. There was very little time available for tank-crew training, but fortunately the M26 shared the same fire controls and engine as the M4A3 medium tank from which the tank crews transitioned. The new M26 tanks would prove more than capable of handling the NKPA's T-34-85 medium tanks.

To improve fire support, the Marines had worked closely with the US Army Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, with the latter developing a new, simplified "target grid method" to control artillery fires. The Marines also created, at the divisional level, a Fire Support Coordination

The M1 Garand rifle. The M1's Achilles heel was its eight-shot enbloc clip. When all eight shots had been fired, the empty metal clip was ejected with a loud metallic "ping" and the bolt locked to the rear, only releasing when a fresh eight-round clip was inserted. (Rock Island Auctions, www.rockislandauctions.com)

The four Sikorsky HO3S-1 helicopters of Marine Observation Squadron 6 (VMO-6), although slow and a bit underpowered, would prove invaluable in the mountains of Korea where the terrain was steep and the few existing roads were poor and clogged with military traffic. Commanders and vital supplies could be quickly brought to the front and critically wounded casualties could be swiftly evacuated. (NARA)

Center to allow the commander to coordinate *all* supporting fires: mortars, artillery, air, and naval gunfire.

Perhaps most important, Marine Air Control Groups (MACGs) were incorporated into every Marine air wing, designed to create the critical link between ground commanders and US Marine Corps aviation. Tactical Air Control Parties (TACPs) equipped with jeep-mounted and backpack radios were attached to Marine ground battalions and larger units. Guided via radio by Forward Air Controllers (FACs) who were themselves pilots and by colorful ground marking panels, the Corsair pilots were able to deliver accurate close air support strikes to within 100yd of friendly ground troops. The system was extremely effective throughout the Korean War.

Marine Corps LVT-3C and LVTA-5 amphibious tractors that brought the assault troops ashore at Inchon again proved vital in ferrying US Marine Corps, US Army, and ROK Army troops across the Han River to the outskirts of Seoul. All of the massive modern bridges over the Han had been demolished. One of the first Marine Reserve units to be called up had been the San Francisco-based 12th Amphibian Tractor Company. (NARA)

Hill 342

August 2–9, 1950

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

When the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade arrived in the port of Pusan on August 3, 1950, UN forces in Korea were at their lowest ebb and in danger of being pushed off the Korean peninsula entirely.

Prior to the war, the Republic of Korea had been supplied military equipment by the United States and trained with the aid of KMAG, but the fledgling ROK Army that tried to halt the NKPA juggernaut was, compared to its North Korean counterpart, smaller, poorly armed, and incompletely trained. The NKPA units that swept across the 38th Parallel on June 25, 1950 outnumbered the ROK Army by roughly two-to-one in infantry and were better trained. The NKPA had a three-to-one advantage in artillery, and had heavier weapons with longer ranges. The Yakovlev Yak-9 fighters and Ilyushin Il-10 ground-attack aircraft of the North Korean People's Air Force (NKPAF) roamed the skies unopposed; the ROK forces had no fighter aircraft or even any antiaircraft batteries.

The most significant weapon, and the one that did the most to usher in the great initial successes of the NKPA's invasion, was armor. The NKPA had at its disposal a total of nearly 250 T-34-85 medium tanks. A new and improved version of the famous original T-34 that had come as such a shock to the German Army in 1941, the 35-ton T-34-85 was introduced early in 1944 and featured an enlarged three-man turret boasting 90mm of armor and mounting a long-barreled, high-velocity 85mm main gun. Tank regiments or battalions equipped with T-34-85s were assigned individually to support each of the invading NKPA infantry divisions, and often acted as the spearheads of NKPA attacks.

To stop these armored spearheads, the ROK Army had no tanks of its own. It did have approximately 140 US-made antitank guns; a precious few

The NKPA's 3rd and 4th divisions, supported by T-34-85 tanks of the 107th and 109th Tank regiments, entered the South Korean capital of Seoul on June 28, just three days after crossing the border. Here, infantry supported by T-34-85 tanks and SU-76M self-propelled guns advance through the outskirts of the city. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 60587)

were newer but still obsolete 57mm M1 weapons, but the overwhelming majority were 37mm M3 weapons. German 37mm antitank guns had proven completely ineffective against the first generation of Red Army T-34 tanks in 1941; in 1950, old American 37mm antitank guns were, of course, utterly useless against the more heavily armored second-generation T-34-85. Nor did the ROK infantry's bazookas – World War II-vintage 2.36in M9 antitank rocket launchers – prove very successful against the thick, well-sloped armor of the T-34-85.

These were the only antitank weapons in the ROK Army's arsenal; the South Koreans had no recoilless rifles, not a single round of High Explosive Anti-Tank (HEAT) ammunition for their artillery, and no antitank mines. Some extraordinarily brave ROK Army infantrymen and engineers, resorting to weapons and tactics of desperation, swarmed aboard NKPA tanks with satchel and pole charges, destroying some of the tanks but usually at the cost of their own lives. Among the survivors who had seen their weapons fail miserably time after time against them, the T-34-85 began to gain a mystique of invincibility within the ranks of the ROK Army that led some soldiers to flee at the sight and sound of their approach.

By June 27, US combat aircraft from the Far East Air Force based in Japan were being committed to the fight for Korea and they were soon joined by US and Royal Navy carrier-based aircraft. With many experienced pilots, veterans of World War II, and modern, high-performance aircraft, UN fighter aircraft eliminated the NKPAF almost entirely within a few short weeks. Initially, however, the UN's use of air power to stop NKPA ground forces racing southward down the Korean peninsula frequently proved to be ineffective and unsuccessful.

The nearest available US troops were the four US Army infantry divisions of MacArthur's Far East Command, on occupation duty in Japan. With postwar drawdowns and budget cuts, these infantry divisions were all woefully understrength, with less than 70 percent of their authorized number of personnel. Even though the US Army's tactics and training revolved around infantry regiments of three infantry battalions each, every infantry regiment in these four infantry divisions had been reduced to only two infantry

battalions. Equipment and weapons left over from World War II were often in poor condition and there were shortages of mortars and recoilless rifles. Each infantry division was supposed to have its own heavy-tank battalion to combat enemy armor, but instead only a single company of M24 Chaffee light reconnaissance tanks per infantry division was available.

In addition to personnel and equipment shortages, the post-1945 US Army had let discipline and standards erode, and occupation duty in Japan had been rather soft for the soldiers stationed there. Physical fitness was below par and combat training from the individual to regimental level had been sorely neglected. Colonel John H. "Mike" Michaelis, whose 27th Infantry Regiment became the first "fire brigade" of the Pusan Perimeter, recalled the problems (Halberstam 2007: 143). Training in marksmanship and weapons maintenance was poor. Long classroom lectures on the pros of "Americanism" and the cons of Communism had occupied time that would have been better spent on combat maneuvers and crawling through the mud with rounds of live ammunition passing just overhead. He considered that the minutiae of occupation duty had cosseted soldiers rather than strengthening and hardening them for future combat. Despite this, there was a certain arrogance pervasive throughout US Army ranks stemming from victory in World War II only five years previously. From private to general, many believed the mere presence of US Army soldiers would be enough to stop the NKPA soldiers, who were thought to be little more than a mob of barefoot peasants.

Beginning with a small task force from the 24th Infantry Division, an ever-increasing number of US Army troops from Japan were flown and shipped to Korea via whatever transport was available and deployed haphazardly and virtually without intelligence into the path of the NKPA juggernaut racing south. They fared little better than their ROK Army counterparts; rounds from the Americans' own 2.36in bazookas and 75mm recoilless rifles also bounced harmlessly off the T-34-85s. The arrival of US Army tanks rushed from Japan did nothing to change the balance, either. The lightweight, thinly armored M24 Chaffee light tanks available were fitted with short-barreled, low-velocity 75mm main guns that could not penetrate the T-34-85's hull or turret armor across the entire frontal arc; but the T-34-85's high-velocity 85mm main gun, delivering 2½ times as much energy, could smash through an M24's armor from almost any angle or range – an ability that only enhanced the T-34-85's growing myth of invulnerability.

By August, the battered and exhausted survivors of the ROK Army and the four understrength US Army infantry divisions had been pushed back into the Pusan Perimeter, a small enclave in the southeastern corner of the Korean peninsula around the port of Pusan. Designated the Eighth Army, UN forces on the ground were commanded by the short, bulldog-faced Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker who, trying to stiffen the will of his shaken and depleted units, issued what became known in the media as his "Stand or die!" order. The Naktong River provided the last defensible natural barrier between Pusan and a total NKPA victory, but the 140-mile-long UN defensive line along the watercourse was stretched perilously thin and riddled with gaps. If the NKPA could punch a single sizable hole through the Pusan Perimeter they could pour in troops to exploit it and the war would be over and won within a few days.

The first US troops to arrive in Korea, the hastily assembled Task Force Smith from the 24th Infantry Division on occupation duty in Japan, were no more capable of stopping the NKPA's T-34-85 tanks and infantry than the ROK Army had been. Numbering only 540 men in total, they were airdropped into an isolated and unsupported defensive position right in the path of an NKPA tank regiment and two full infantry regiments with disastrous results. (NARA)

Despite the defense of the Pusan Perimeter remaining very much in doubt, with the arrival of the US Army's 5th RCT from Hawaii, closely followed by the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade from California, the Eighth Army's leadership began to plan the first major UN counterattack of the war. US Army and Marine Corps units were hastily combined into a strike force designated Task Force Kean (after Major General William B. Kean, commanding general 25th Infantry Division) and plans were laid to mount the Saichon Offensive. Task Force Kean consisted of large elements of Kean's division plus the 5th RCT and the newly arrived 1st Provisional Marine Brigade. From Masan, these US ground forces were to attack westward to seize the Chongju Pass and break up a suspected massing of NKPA troops near Taegu for a final push to break the Pusan Perimeter.

The offensive may have looked good on paper, but the NKPA had hardly been standing idle while the Eighth Army formulated its plan and deployed its new troops. Major General Pang Ho-san's crack 6th Division had just been resupplied and was consolidating for its own all-out attack, aimed at breaking through the UN defensive cordon near Masan. Unknown to the Americans, the 6th Division, bolstered by the 83rd Motorcycle Regiment, had been ordered to mount its own all-out attack over the same contested ground.

The 6th Division jumped off first and unintentionally crashed right into the vanguard of Task Force Kean's advance, and the two forces collided head-on in a confused engagement that would result in three days of heavy combat and casualties for both sides. The first combat engagement between the US Marine Corps and the NKPA initially involved only a single platoon of Marines on Hill 342 near Chindong-ni. Hill 342 commanded the valleys and roads on both sides of its ridgeline and would become the vital high ground that was bitterly contested by both sides in increasing numbers for more than a week.

Hill 342, August 2–9, 1950

MAP KEY

1 August 2–3: Hill 342 is occupied by a single US Army platoon, from Co. G, 2/5 RCT. The defenders are thrown from Hill 342 by an early-morning company-strength assault mounted by elements of the NKPA's 6th Division.

2 August 3–4: In a nighttime counterattack, Co. F, 2/5 RCT retakes the high ground. The company commander is ordered to dig in and hold the hill at all costs. The US soldiers soon face heavy pressure and repeated assaults from elements of the 13th and 15th Infantry regiments of the NKPA's 6th Division.

3 August 6–7: As the strength of Co. F, 2/5 RCT is steadily eroded by casualties, orders come down from Division for the newly arrived 2/5 Marines to send 1st Platoon, Co. G, 2/5 Marines to reinforce Hill 342. Bolstered with a machine-gun squad and radio operator, the US Marine Corps platoon makes a brutal ascent of Hill 342's steep terrain in blistering heat.

4 August 7–8: Together, the American soldiers and Marines continue to hold the hill against direct enemy attacks despite mounting casualties and a critical shortage of water and ammunition. Supporting artillery and frequent close air support strikes by MAG-33 play a crucial role in breaking up NKPA attacks and inflict heavy casualties. Small elements of NKPA infantry are still able to infiltrate around the flanks of the American positions.

5 August 7: Co. D, 2/5 Marines advances to relieve the dwindling defenders of Hill 342, but they are stopped short of gaining the top when they become engaged with NKPA infiltrators en route.

6 August 7: To the southwest of Hill 342, Co. E, 2/5 Marines advances to take the secondary parallel ridgeline on the far left flank.

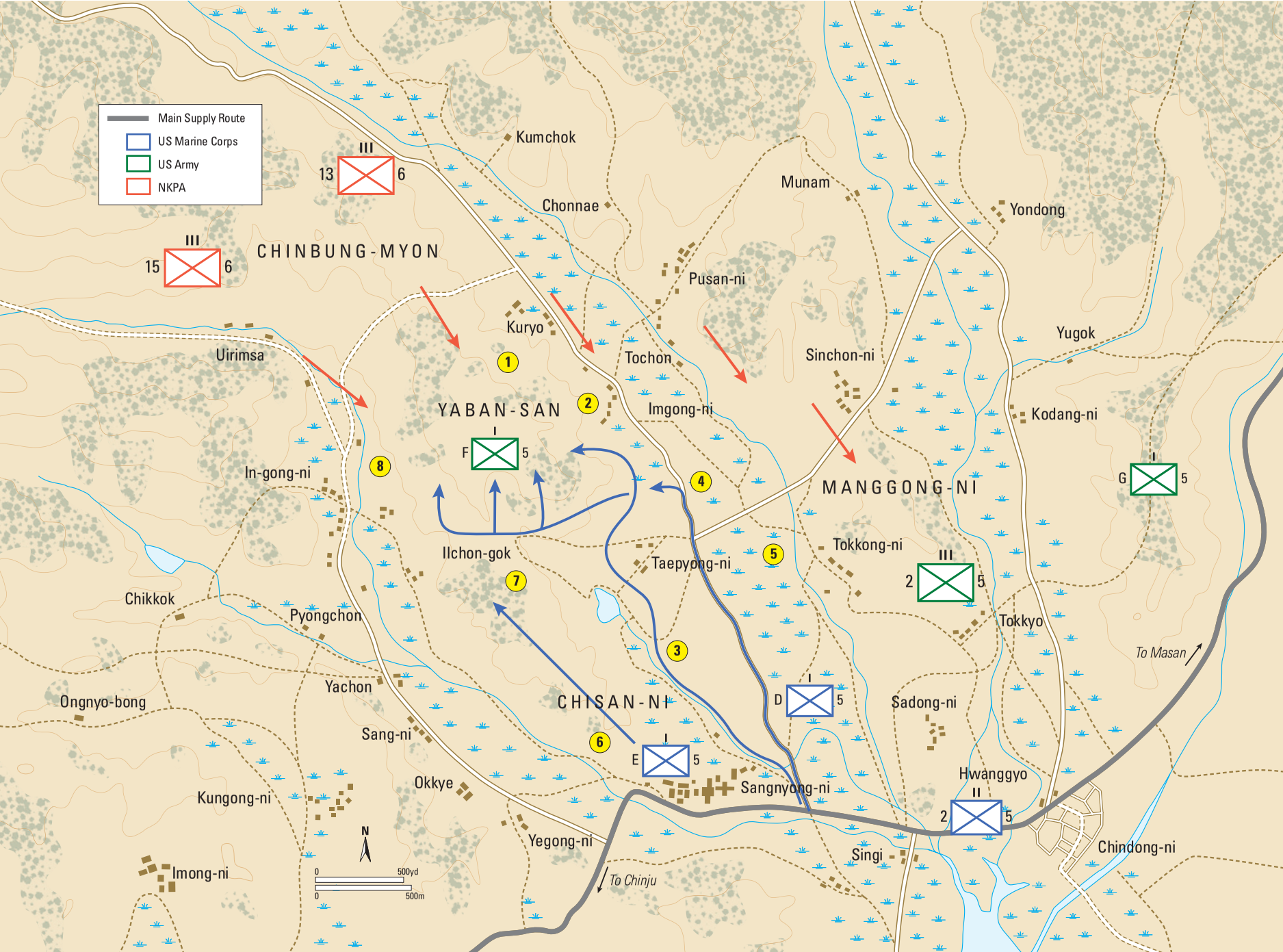
7 August 8: Co. D, 2/5 Marines reaches the crest of Hill 342 and relieves the battered American survivors holding it.

8 August 8–9: Co. D, 2/5 Marines continues to defend Hill 342 against a series of last-ditch attacks by elements of the NKPA's 6th Division. Co. E, 2/5 Marines secures the secondary flanking ridge in its entirety.

Battlefield environment

The Korean landscape of 1950 was far different than the thriving mosaic of cities, industries, and modern infrastructure it is today. US Army historian Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall noted the many problems posed by terrain composed of steep ridges continuing as far as one could see (Marshall 1963: 5). Endlessly ascending and descending hill after hill, day after day, proved more exhausting than the actual combat. Modern Western armies relied heavily on wheeled transport, but the Korean road network was thin and poorly developed, sometimes little more than ox-cart tracks, and always restricted to the small valley floors where traffic was exposed to any enemy situated on the high ground. Even finding enough flat ground to set up an artillery battery could be problematic. In this environment, in August temperatures that daily rose to well over 100°F, the NKPA and the US Marine Corps engaged in savage battle for just over a week for the possession of a single hill.

US Army historian Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall noted that all fighting in Korea was either uphill or downhill. This photograph of Saddle Ridge, near Taegu, is representative of the type of steep, mountainous terrain soldiers and Marines had to slog up and down in sweltering heat. (NARA)


Main Supply Route
US Marine Corps
US Army
NKPA
III
13
6
Kumchok
Chonnae
Munam
Yondong
III
15
6
CHINBUNG-MYON
Pusan-ni
Kuryo
Yugok
Uirimsa
1
Tochon
Sinchon-ni
YABAN-SAN
2
Imgong-ni
Kodang-ni
I
F
5
I
G
5
In-gong-ni
8
4
MANGGONG-NI
Ilchon-gok
5
Tokkong-ni
Taepyong-ni
III
2
5
7
Chikkok
Pyongchon
Tokkyo
To Masan
3
Yachon
Ongnyo-bong
CHISAN-NI
I
D
5
Sadong-ni
Sang-ni
6
I
E
5
Hwanggyo
Okkye
Sangnyong-ni
II
2
5
Kungong-ni
N
Yegong-ni
Singi
Chindong-ni
Imong-ni
0
500yd
0
500m
To Chinju

INTO COMBAT

The NKPA's 6th Division, with which Task Force Kean had unintentionally collided head-on, was considered a crack unit by the NKPA. It had originally been created from the largely ethnic-Korean 166th Division of the CPLA's 56th Army, transferred as a whole to Sinuiju in July 1949. There the veteran campaigners of the unit were retrained on North Korean weaponry, terminology, formations, tactics, and military practices. From September 1949 through February 1950, they conducted training progressively from company up to regimental level in field exercises that emphasized mountain warfare and nighttime fighting.

Commanded by Major General Pang Ho-san, the 6th Division was composed of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Infantry regiments and the 6th Artillery Regiment. The 6th Division played a major role in the June offensive and, along with the 4th Division, had been awarded the honorific title of "Seoul Division" for its part in the capture of the capital city of South Korea. The 6th Division had begun the war with a strength of 10,000 men and had suffered relatively few casualties, around 400, during its long drive south. In early August the 6th Division's initial clashes with the US Army's 25th Infantry Division had cost the NKPA at least another 400 casualties. For the final all-out push to Pusan, the 6th Division was bolstered by the attachment of Colonel Pak Sun Hae's 83rd Motorcycle Regiment, bringing its strength to an estimated 7,500 and adding considerable numbers of automatic weapons.

NKPA motorcycle troops, mounted on Soviet IMZ-Ural M-72 motorcycle-sidecar combinations armed with light automatic weapons, were used primarily as fast reconnaissance elements for mechanized units. On August 11, 15 miles southwest of Hill 342, the 83rd Motorcycle Regiment was caught on the open road by a flight of US Marine Corps Corsairs from VMF-323 as the NKPA unit retreated from Kosong. As more Corsairs and US Air Force North American F-51 Mustangs joined the fray, the 83rd Motorcycle Regiment was essentially wiped out in the resulting "Kosong Turkey Shoot." (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

NKPA troops rapidly advance through rugged mountain terrain, the men in the foreground carrying M1910 Maxim heavy machine guns, their Sokolov wheeled mounts, and ammunition. Physically hardened by long marches and mountain training, NKPA infantrymen were expected to route-march 30km (19 miles) in an eight-hour day, or even 45km (28 miles) in a 10–12-hour forced march. The more heavily motorized and mechanized UN forces were restricted to vulnerable valleys where the only available roads lay. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 37028)

Although numerous large-scale battles involving both US Army and Marine Corps units were fought in multiple locations in conjunction with the Saichon Offensive, the first open clash between NKPA and US Marine Corps ground forces in combat initially involved only a single platoon of the latter. This focus falls on just one small corner of a large and complex battlefield, a single barren hill mass.

To Koreans, the dominating tooth-shaped 1,100ft peak northwest of the coastal village of Chindong-ni was called Yaban-san. To the US Army, it would become forever known as Fox Hill (after Fox Company, the initial defenders of the hill). The Marines referred to it as Hill 342, its elevation in meters on their maps. For both the North Koreans and the Americans, Yaban-san was crucial ground, for the hill mass dominated 2 miles of the main supply route in the valley below and offered artillery observers an unimpeded view of numerous positions occupied by US Army and Marine Corps units. Such was the tactical significance of Hill 342 that both sides committed hundreds of men to an eight-day battle for its possession.

On August 2, Hill 342's peak had been occupied by a lone US Army platoon from Co. G, 2/5 RCT. Early on the morning of August 3, a determined attack by at least a full company of North Korean infantry drove the Americans off the mountain. That night, Co. F, 2/5 RCT, commanded by Captain Stanley Howarth, counterattacked and re-took the hill. Numbering 120 men at the beginning of the fight, Howarth's company was ordered by Kean himself to hold the hill at all costs.

Hill 342 was part of a ridgeline that continued northwest, gaining in elevation as it approached its highest point at Sobuk-san (Hill 738). From higher ground on this ridge and from another ridge across the valley to the east, NKPA observers could look down upon Hill 342. Any visible movement by the US soldiers observed during daylight hours was swiftly met with bursts

Major General Pang Ho-san

The KPLA's 6th Division was ably commanded by Major General Pang Ho-san. Born in northern Hamgyong Province in present-day North Korea in 1906, Pang had become a soldier at an early age, joining the liberation movement to fight the Imperial Japanese occupiers of Korea. Recognized for his abilities, he was chosen to go to the Soviet Union for a military education in 1937–39. In 1940, he became a member of the CPLA and fought during World War II. He continued to fight and move up through the ranks of the CPLA from 1945 until 1948 and the successful conclusion of the Chinese Civil War.

Pang was the political commissar of the CPLA's 166th Division when it was transferred to North Korea in 1949, and he was appointed as its commanding general when the unit became the NKPA's 6th Division. He was highly decorated for the division's numerous successes during the early months of the war, including his nation's highest award of "Hero of the Korean Democratic People's Republic." During the successful UN counteroffensives of September 1950, Pang was able to keep the remnants of the 6th Division intact during the retreat back to North Korea. In January 1951 he was given command of the NKPA's newly formed V Corps. US military intelligence rated him very highly in a 1952 report: "PANG is rated the best of the corps commanders, being a first-class strategist, tactician and commander who gets the most out of his men. He is described as being constantly concerned about their welfare as well as with the state of their training and equipment. PANG is partial to Chinese tactics such as infiltration, attacks from the rear, and night and surprise attacks. He favors close combat but avoids anything resembling 'human sea' tactics" (US Army 1952: 98).

At war's end, Pang was singled out for personal praise by Kim Il-sung and was appointed President of the Army War College in 1958. In 1959, however, on suspicion of having had ties to the pro-Chinese "Anti-Party" movement, he was purged and executed.

of long-range machine-gun fire or accurately directed mortar fire. The hills to the north were thick with NKPA forces: two full battalions, one each from the 13th and 15th Infantry regiments.

The only shade to be found on Hill 342 was beneath the soldiers' own steel helmets, and these grew too hot to touch as the sun beat down all day. Nightfall brought only some relief from the scorching heat and ushered in the most determined assaults by the NKPA. The soldiers of Co. F managed to beat off these attacks, but the company's numbers were being steadily reduced by ever-increasing casualties even though many men with minor wounds chose to remain fighting on the hill with their comrades. Water and ammunition were always in short supply.

As the initial elements of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade began to arrive in the Chindong-ni area, under verbal orders from Kean they were temporarily placed under the command of Colonel John H. Michaelis, the commanding officer of the 27th Infantry Regiment. With the US Army units in the area depleted by casualties and already hotly engaged, a reinforced platoon from 3/5 Marines was requested to go to the aid of the rapidly dwindling Co. F on Hill 342.

The job fell to the men of 1st Platoon, Co. G, commanded by Second Lieutenant John J. "Blackie" Cahill. Reinforced with a machine-gun squad equipped with a single .30-caliber air-cooled Browning light machine gun and a radio operator with an SCR-300 backpack radio, the platoon set out for Michaelis' command post where a guide from Co. F was waiting to lead them to Hill 342.

All told, Cahill's contingent numbered 52 men. They set out for their objective after midnight on the night of August 6/7, but even then the air was still hot and muggy and the Marines were burdened down with an average

Brigadier General Edward A. Craig

The commanding general 1st Provisional Marine Brigade was Connecticut-born Brigadier General Edward Arthur Craig, who had been a Marine officer for 33 of his 55 years. Born on November 22, 1896, he was a graduate of St. John's Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin. Craig did not see front-line service in World War I, but was a veteran of the numerous "Banana Republic" conflicts in Central America during the 1920s and 1930s and also served in China and the Philippines in addition to Fleet duty.

Promoted to full colonel in May 1942, Craig led the 9th Marine Regiment through the brutal campaigns for Guadalcanal and Bougainville in 1943. With a temporary promotion to brigadier general in 1944, he led his 9th Marine Regiment in the attack on Guam, and he served as corps operations officer for the invasion of Iwo Jima in 1945. His World War II service saw him decorated with the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, and Navy Cross.

Permanently promoted to brigadier general in 1947, in 1949 Craig became the assistant division commander of the 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, California. With the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade's rapid formation and deployment to Korea, he was appointed as its commanding general. Addressing the men of the brigade before they boarded ships bound for Korea, the tall, thin, white-haired general concluded his speech by stating that he would never issue the units of his brigade an order to retreat, and asking his Marines to fight like their predecessors had (Hammes 2008: 181).

When the entire 1st Marine Division had been fully re-formed for the duration of the Korean War, Craig reverted to his former role as assistant divisional commander. For his service during the conflict, he received an Air Medal with gold star, a Silver Star, and a Distinguished Service Medal. He retired in 1951 with the rank of lieutenant general and passed away on December 11, 1994.

load of about 70lb per man. Before meeting the enemy or even beginning their ascent of the hill proper, the platoon suffered two men wounded by friendly fire when a US Army BAR gunner, whose unit had not been informed the Marines were passing to their front, fired at figures dimly seen in the darkness.

There could be no use of tactical formations in ascending the steep hill. In many places it was so steep that the Marines simply had to crawl and claw their way upward, their dungarees soaked black from sweat. They tried to husband their precious water, but two 1-quart canteens per man were insufficient to begin with. Sergeant Tom Blackmon, the Co. F guide, at one point took a wrong turn that required them to go part way back down the hill and climb a different spur. The platoon paused in a defiladed position on the lower slope of the hill around 0500hrs, intending to make the last, steepest ascent when it was light enough to see.

They set out again at first light, with the temperature already climbing, and struggled up the steep pitches. Halfway up the hill, the platoon was raked by long-range fire from an NKPA machine gun, which severely wounded Staff Sergeant Robert Robinson (platoon sergeant) and Blackmon. The slope was so steep that BAR gunner PFC Bill Tome had to have his assistant gunner, PFC Melvin Brooks, physically hold his body onto a tiny ledge so that he could return fire and suppress the NKPA machine gun.

Cahill and two of his NCOs forged ahead and made contact with Howarth around 0800hrs. The Co. F command post was in a slight depression containing old burial mounds that offered some degree of protection from direct enemy fire. The survivors of Co. F were deployed in a triangular perimeter conforming to the shape of the peak. The GIs had been spreading out across a broader front in additional foxholes for their daylight defense, then pulling back into a tighter solid perimeter for the inevitable nighttime

In general, Marines preferred this version of the Browning .30-caliber M1919A4 light machine gun mounted on the M2 tripod to the later M1919A6. The M1919A6 was the same machine gun modified with a shoulder stock, bipod, carrying handle, and lighter barrel; but it was also heavier and less accurate than the M1919A4, and was awkward to handle. (NARA)

assaults. That morning, the hilltop had been under such intense enemy fire that the Co. F soldiers had been unable to leave their nighttime positions. With the increased activity of the Marines arriving, NKPA machine-gun, small-arms, and mortar fire greatly intensified on the hilltop. Of the 52 1st Platoon, Co. G Marines who began the journey, only 37 reached the top of the hill that morning: 15 men had either been wounded by NKPA fire or temporarily felled by dehydration, heat exhaustion, and heatstroke en route. As for Co. F, casualties had been so heavy that even with Cahill's platoon the total number of GIs and Marines now holding the hill was still less than 100.

The two officers determined to insert the Marines into the gaps in the thin Co. F line. Sergeant Jack Macy – now the senior Marine NCO after both Robinson and Blackmon had been wounded – and another squad leader led the Marines to their positions. Each time they had to crawl back and forth from the command post to each shallow foxhole in the line as enemy bullets snapped through the air just above them. As Macy was placing the BAR team of Tome and Brooks in a key position, the prone Marines were hit by accurate bursts of fire from an NKPA machine gun on higher ground to the north. Both Tome and Brooks were killed before the enemy machine gun could be silenced by a nearby Marine, PFC Lonzo Barnett, who was within grenade range. Near the command post, when the Marine light machine gun jammed and gunner Sergeant Kermit "Kurt" Wilhelm was clearing it, enemy soldiers were so close that Wilhelm's assistant gunner, PFC John Johnson, shot at least

two with his M1911A1 pistol before a rifle bullet pierced his helmet and killed him instantly. In addition to the three Marines killed, three other Marines and five GIs, including Howarth, were wounded by the intense NKPA machine-gun fire lashing the hilltop. First Lieutenant Frank B. Brooks, Jr., the company executive officer, assumed command of Co. F.

Cahill's SCR-300 was perhaps the most valuable reinforcement as Co. F's communications had been unreliable; the radio batteries they had been issued had deteriorated so badly in long-term storage that they would only function for an hour or so, if they worked at all. Cahill was now able to call down artillery fire against suspected NKPA mortar positions and observation posts, reducing the volume of incoming mortar bombs somewhat but not preventing them altogether. An airdrop of water and ammunition was requested, but the US Air Force C-47 Skytrain transport plane dropped all but one of the precious bundles behind NKPA lines. The North Korean infantrymen were soon showering Hill 342 with American Mk 2 fragmentation grenades that had been dropped in their laps.

A US Marine Corps commander's most powerful weapon was frequently his radio, in this case a backpack-mounted SCR-300 FM "walkie-talkie" radio transceiver. With the "light" 9lb BA-80 battery installed, the total unit weighed more than 32lb. Radios enabled Marines on the ground to call in devastating mortar and artillery fires or close air support strikes. (NARA)

The 1st Provisional Marine Brigade's small Stinson OY-2 observation planes made another supply attempt, the pilots coming in at stall speed and treetop height while the observers dropped 5-gallon water cans padded with blankets out the windows. They were on target, but the water cans burst upon impact and only a few precious ounces of water per man could be recovered. Dehydration led Macy to take a party of four volunteers back down the mountain to find a water source. Under intermittent long-range small-arms fire much of the time, they managed to reach a stream where they drank their fill and then started back up the treacherous slopes with three 5-gallon canvas waterbags, weighing 40lb apiece, and as many canteens as they could carry.

Throughout the battle, the constant presence of MAG-33 Corsairs over the entire battlefield during daylight hours was crucial to the success of the Marines on the ground. Operating from two small US Navy escort carriers, USS *Badoeng Strait* (CVE-116) and USS *Sicily* (CVE-118), US Marine Corps fighter squadrons VMF-214 and VMF-323 flew more than 100 sorties during the first three days of ground fighting. They were able to keep at least four Corsairs roaming the battlefield all day long, ready to strike at a moment's notice when called upon. Guided by colorful ground panels set out by the Marine infantry to mark their positions, the Corsairs were able to make strafing runs on NKPA targets so close to friendly lines that the men in the foxholes ducked under showers of spent shell casings ejected from the planes' guns.

Each US Army and Marine Corps rifle company had a mortar section equipped with three of these 60mm M2 light mortars, capable of hurling 3lb high-explosive bombs to a range of 2,000yd. Co. F, 2/5 RCT's mortar section had not been able to stay on Hill 342 because of the casualties incurred and the difficulty of resupplying ammunition. Co. D, 2/5 Marines' mortar section arrived just in time to help break up the last large-scale NKPA assault upon the hill. (NARA)

In the valley below, on the morning of August 7, 2/5 Marines had arrived and in response to the perilous situation on Hill 342, Captain John Finn, Jr., was ordered the relieve the beleaguered defenders with his Co. D. Even though the Marines had marched all night long and been without sleep for 24 hours, they began clawing their way up the south-facing slope of Hill 342, forced simply to ignore the long-range machine-gun and sniper fire that came from NKPA units on the high ground 1 mile east across the valley floor. En route the Marines discovered and disposed of a few small groups of NKPA infiltrators who had managed to work their way around Hill 342 during the night. Five Americans were wounded by enemy fire during the climb, but it was the steep, rough terrain, coupled with exhaustion and dehydration in the afternoon heat that reached 112°F which took the heaviest toll; fully 12 men collapsed unconscious from heatstroke. By nightfall, the exhausted men of Co. D could go no farther and dug in a short distance from the crest of Hill 342. Contact was made with Brooks and Cahill, who said their men could hold the hill for the night with reinforcements now only a few hundred yards away.

Under cover of darkness, however, NKPA infantrymen silently crawled closer to the hilltop on all sides. Just before dawn on August 8, a green flare arced into the sky and the NKPA assaulted the hilltop. The surviving GIs and Marines opened up with everything they had and showered grenades upon the attackers, driving most of them back, but a number of NKPA soldiers overran the foxholes on the northeast leg of the triangular perimeter. Only after a brutal bout of hand-to-hand combat with bayonets and entrenching

tools were the NKPA soldiers repelled. Three soldiers and one Marine were wounded, and PFC Michael Yercich was killed, his body riddled with bayonet wounds.

The men of Co. D had just started the last stage of their ascent of Hill 342, and the noise of the NKPA's attack spurred them to rush to the top. Observing this, the NKPA units on the surrounding heights again opened fire on the hilltop with everything they had. Private David S. Van Dommelman of Co. D recalled: "We effected the relief, but it was costly. [Second] Lieutenants [Arthur A.] Oakley and [Wallace J.] Reid were killed while getting their platoons into position to repel the attack. The other platoon leader [Lieutenant Edward T. Emmelman] was wounded. CPT Finn was wounded while checking out Oakley and Reid, leaving the XO [executive officer] in command. He was evacuated with heat prostration" (Ent 1996: 140).

The executive officer was First Lieutenant Robert T. Hanfin, Jr., who was coming up the hill with the company headquarters element and the 60mm mortar platoon. He raced to the top, got the mortars quickly emplaced, and re-organized the defensive lines just before another determined NKPA assault in sizable strength assailed the hill. The mortar men carpeted the hillsides with high-explosive bombs, each tube dropping one round every two seconds, and the men in the foxholes poured out small-arms fire and hurled grenades, breaking up and beating back the NKPA attack.

Immediately afterward, as Hanfin was contacted by battalion headquarters on the radio, he dropped unconscious from heat prostration. Master Sergeant Harold Reeves, Co. D's seasoned gunnery sergeant of nearly 30 years' service, quickly but calmly took command of the rifle platoons. Second Lieutenant Leroy K. Wirth, a forward observer from 1/11 Marines, took responsibility for calling down fire from supporting arms. In particular, he unleashed the Corsairs of MAG-33 circling overhead upon the surrounding NKPA positions.

For the first time, the night of August 8/9 was comparatively quiet on Hill 342 and the NKPA mounted no further attacks. Throughout the night and morning, the Marines experienced only desultory harassing fire and sniping from long range; the NKPA was now giving Hill 342 a wide berth. That afternoon, the Marines were relieved by a US Army outfit from the 24th Infantry Regiment.

Holding Hill 342 had been costly for the defenders; Brooks recalled that only eight GIs remained healthy enough to walk down the hill with him. For the Marines, Cahill's platoon suffered six killed and 12 wounded, while Co. D lost eight men dead and 28 wounded. As for the NKPA, Cahill reported a "conservative" estimate of 150 enemy killed, and 2/5 Marines reported a total of approximately 400 enemy KIA by the end of the battle. Both sides had learned considerable hard lessons about their opponent:

> The Marines got their first taste of the enemy. They found him spirited, tenacious, well-trained, and generously equipped with Russian gear. Used to having the campaign their own way, the North Koreans fought confidently, but reacted with considerable surprise when they found themselves facing troops who gave no ground, hung on to their weapons, and brought in their wounded and dead. (Chapin 2002: 23)

Obong-ni Ridge

August 17–18, 1950

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Firefights were still raging in conjunction with Task Force Kean and the failed Saichon Offensive when the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade was abruptly withdrawn from the area and hurriedly sent to another contested hot spot on the Pusan Perimeter. This was to become the Marines' role for the remainder of their time under Eighth Army command: they would become the "fire brigade" of the Pusan Perimeter battles. The first crisis the Marines were called upon to counter was the elimination of the first so-called Naktong Bulge. This was a bridgehead across the Naktong River that had been established by the NKPA's 4th Division.

The UN defensive "lines" along the eastern banks of the Naktong River were perilously slender and a variety of gaps did exist – if the NKPA could find and exploit them. Standard doctrine called for a full-strength US Army infantry division to hold a front 10,000yd (5.7 miles) wide. The 24th Infantry Division had entered the Korean War with only two of its three allotted infantry regiments. The six previous weeks of constant combat and delaying actions greatly thinned the ranks with heavy casualties and equipment losses; and the 21st and 34th Infantry regiments had been eroded down to roughly 40 percent strength. Nevertheless, the battered and depleted 24th Infantry Division was now tasked with holding 34 miles of the river, almost six times the frontage set out in doctrine. At the Naktong Bulge itself the depleted 3/34 Infantry, which was down to fewer than 300 front-line infantrymen, had been ordered to hold a 15,000yd frontage which, by the book, called for more than the entire division.

Across the Naktong in the vicinity of Hyopch'on, gathering its strength for an all-out attack toward Pusan to end the war, was another one of the NKPA's

At midnight on the night of August 5/6, 1950, an 800-man force from the 1st and 3rd infantry battalions of the 16th Regiment began crossing the Naktong River at the Ohang Ferry site. Most of the infantrymen simply stripped naked and carried their clothing and weapons held over their heads as they waded through the neck-deep water while machine-gun, light-mortar, and antitank-rifle teams floated their weapons across on improvised rafts. A similar NKPA river crossing a few miles to the north was detected and stopped by a minefield, small-arms fire, and a barrage of mortar and artillery fire. Downriver, the 1st and 3rd infantry battalions managed to cross undetected and unengaged. On the east bank, they consolidated and silently made their way up a brushy draw through what reconnaissance had shown to be a 2-mile gap between Co. I and Co. L of the 3/34 Infantry. Once deep behind American lines, they attacked Co. L from the rear, overran the regimental 4.2in mortar position, and attacked an artillery battery at dawn. Every night, one or two NKPA infantry battalions would cross the river in the same manner to bolster the initial bridgehead.

Led by the engineer battalion and using many untrained South Korean "volunteers" as labor, the 4th Division also worked feverishly to construct underwater bridges. A technique first used by Stalin's Red Army, such bridges had become a staple of Soviet river crossings in World War II. Built of rocks, logs, sandbags, and any available natural fill dirt beneath a foot or so of water, these bridges were not only difficult for aerial observers to spot, especially when they were situated in muddy water, but also difficult to destroy with bombs or artillery because the water dissipated much of the blasts. The first underwater bridge constructed by the 4th Division was completed on August 9. Under cover of darkness, NKPA vehicles began rolling across the extended ford, bringing supplies and towing 120mm heavy mortars and artillery pieces. The following night, numbers of T-34-85 tanks and SU-76 self-propelled guns joined the procession of trucks and carts crossing the bridge.

Although several weeks of fighting had reduced the US Army's 24th Infantry Division to just under half its original strength, time and again its officers hastily scraped together some ad hoc units from all available personnel – clerks, cooks, mechanics, truck drivers – to launch a series of counterattacks against the growing Naktong Bulge. These efforts failed to dislodge the growing numbers of NKPA troops who were now infiltrating small elements far to the American rear to set up roadblocks and ambushes on the main (and only) supply route.

The Marines were now being called upon to provide "fresh" troops to aid in an all-out counterattack to eliminate the troublesome Naktong Bulge once and for all before it could become a springboard for a general NKPA attack that would penetrate and spell the end of the Pusan Perimeter and thus the war. Lieutenant General Walker put the Marines temporarily under the command of the 24th Infantry Division and Brigadier General John H. Church. The battered and depleted 24th Infantry Division, the attached 9th RCT from the 2d Infantry Division, and the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade were tasked with attacking and eliminating the NKPA bridgehead.

Church and Brigadier General Craig met on August 15 to make plans and coordinate. On August 16, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade would

As NKPA combat units rapidly advanced southward, their ever-extending supply lines came under increasingly effective interdiction attacks by UN aircraft. The limited number of divisional supply trucks, barely adequate at full strength, were particularly hard hit by air strikes. By the time of the Naktong River fighting, NKPA soldiers and impressed local civilian laborers, always camouflaged, had to bring many vital supplies forward on their backs. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 60599)

be rushed from Miryang to the front near Obong-ni Ridge and go on the attack the morning of August 17. Because the US Marine Corps infantry regiments were not motorized, the US Army promised 145 trucks to transport them there; but only 43 trucks actually showed up, and they were three hours late. Unaware of this problem, Craig and Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. Murray departed by jeep to conduct a personal reconnaissance of the ground.

For their part in eliminating the Naktong Bulge, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade was assigned three objective lines to take, the first and most important being a jumbled mass of hilltops known as Obong-ni Ridge. To most of the Marines, it was simply Objective 1, though some would come to call it Red Slash Hill, but American newspaper and magazine correspondents, not bothering to find out differently, dubbed it "No-Name Ridge." The crest of Obong-ni was held by well dug-in NKPA defenders consisting of the 18th Regiment and one battalion of the 16th Regiment of the 4th Division, supported by a handful of artillery pieces and a company of heavy mortars.

With the Naktong Bulge still growing and NKPA units less than 30 miles from Miryang, to many the situation looked untenable and South Korean government officials in Taegu were reported to be in a state of panic. Even so, an unnamed British military observer, despite his appreciation of the gravity of the situation, was relieved to see the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade going into the fight. Although he could not explain exactly why, he expressed hope and his gut feeling was that the Marines would stop the NKPA thrust. Watching their confident demeanor, he compared them to Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's Army of the Shenandoah and the Coldstream Guards at Dunkirk, and predicted victory (Geer 1952: 56).

Obong-ni Ridge, August 17–18, 1950

MAP KEY

1 0800hrs, August 17: Time, terrain, and tactical circumstances have left the Marines with no option but to mount a frontal assault against the entrenched defenders atop Obong-ni Ridge. After brief and insufficient preparatory fires, the understrength 2/5 Marines mounts the initial assault up the steep, barren slopes. After hours of heavy fighting against a stubborn defense, only a single depleted Marine rifle platoon reaches the top of the ridge on Hill 109, but the heavy casualties suffered during the assault force the remnants of 2/5 Marines to withdraw back down the ridge by midday.

2 1300hrs, August 17: 1/5 Marines passes through 2/5 Marines to renew the assault. This time, heavier and better coordinated artillery bombardments and air strikes are laid upon the objective, and the four M26 Pershing tanks of 3d Platoon, Co. A, 1st Marine Tank Battalion deploy along the base of the ridge to provide direct fire support. Continued heavy NKPA resistance again manages to check the Marine assault on the left flank short of the ridgetop. On the right, supported by a heavy concentration of Marine mortar fire, a last-ditch push by Co. B, 1/5 Marines succeeds in capturing Hill 102 and Hill 109, turning the NKPA flank.

3 2000hrs, August 17: An NKPA counterattack led by four T-34-85 tanks from the attached 107th Armored Regiment advances up the road north of Obong-ni Ridge. An air strike scatters the NKPA infantry and knocks out one tank. The remaining three tanks are quickly destroyed by the fire of Marine 3.5in bazookas, 75mm recoilless rifles, and the 90mm main guns of M26 Pershing tanks.

4 0230hrs, August 18: All available unengaged elements of the 18th Regiment launch fierce counterattacks against the 1/5 Marine elements that have occupied the ridgetop, with the main effort directed at penetrating between the rifle companies holding Hill 102 and Hill 109. After heavy combat, with the aid of artillery and mortar support, the Marines manage to beat back the counterattacks and retain their positions, inflicting severe casualties on the NKPA attackers.

5 0700hrs, August 18: After an extremely accurate and effective air strike, an attack against the NKPA-held Hill 143 by Co. A, 1/5 Marines unexpectedly leads to a major withdrawal of the remaining defenders. The US Marine Corps company commander exploits the situation and continues the assault across the remaining three NKPA-held hilltops, clearing the entire ridgetop southward.

6 1000hrs, August 18: An initially orderly withdrawal by the remnants of the 18th Regiment is scattered by Marine small-arms and mortar fire. With Obong-ni secured, the 3/5 Marines move through the 1/5 Marines' position to launch a successful attack on Objective 2, Hill 207, capturing it at 1237hrs. At this point, the NKPA withdrawal of small individual units breaks down into a widespread and eventually panic-stricken rout of all surviving elements. The rout becomes a slaughter as heavy concentrations of artillery fire and numerous air strikes fall upon the disorganized NKPA forces fleeing toward the Naktong River. By nightfall, the NKPA's 18th Regiment has effectively ceased to exist.

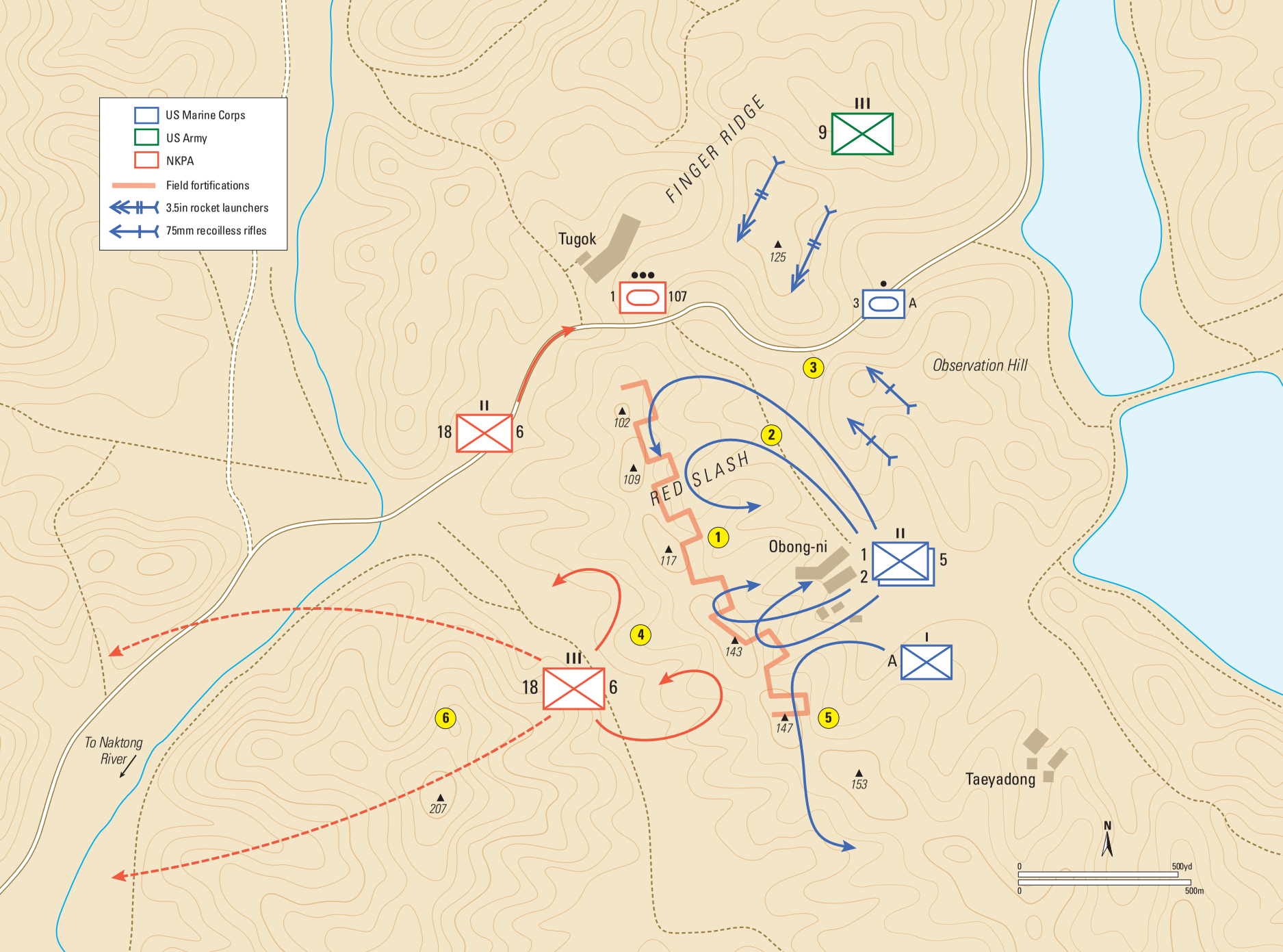
Battlefield environment

The valley carved by the Naktong River, Korea's second-largest watercourse, is fairly narrow, with the steep hills around it rapidly rising to heights of several hundred feet, in places doing so directly from the riverbank itself. Within 3–4 miles of the river, the mountains of the east bank attain heights of up to 2,500ft. In the valleys, squeezed between the hills along stream courses, the bottomless mud of the frequent rice paddies essential to feeding the nation often restricted vehicles, even fully tracked tanks, to the few existing roads.

It was August in the most sweltering hot summer the region had recorded in decades, with afternoon temperatures reaching as high as 114°F. On the exposed hillsides, clad only in dried grass, brush, and a very few small, stunted trees, the sun beat down mercilessly with no shade offered for relief. Water could only be found in the valleys, and it had to be treated with purification tablets or boiled to prevent almost certain dysentery. The rigors of climbing mountains and engaging in combat without sufficient amounts of water and salt tablets caused numerous heat casualties in the first few days.

The mountainous terrain made the evacuation of wounded men from the battlefield slow, difficult, and manpower-intensive, so the Marines began to use their handful of Sikorsky HO3S-1 helicopters to medevac intensive cases out by air.

The Pusan Perimeter was no Maginot Line. Depleted US Army infantry battalions were attempting to hold divisional frontages, leaving gaps and weak spots in the line. This photograph shows a machine-gun team of the US Army's 1st Cavalry Division firing a .50-caliber Browning heavy machine gun at long range at NKPA troops attempting to ford the Naktong River. (US Army)


US Marine Corps
US Army
NKPA
Field fortifications
3.5in rocket launchers
75mm recoilless rifles
FINGER RIDGE
III
9
Tugok
125
1
107
3
A
Observation Hill
II
18
6
102
109
RED SLASH
2
3
1
Obong-ni
117
II
1
2
5
143
I
A
4
III
18
6
6
147
5
153
Taeyadong
To Naktong River
207
N
0
500yd
0
500m

INTO COMBAT

The Marines had little intelligence about the enemy atop Obong-ni Ridge. The 1,100yd-long series of rocky shale hilltops was actually the right wing of the 4th Division's main defensive line. It was defended by the NKPA's 18th Regiment and a battalion from the 16th Regiment, under the overall command of the 18th Regiment's Colonel Chang Ky Dok, a seasoned long-time veteran officer who had formerly served with the CPLA. In addition to fighting positions and machine-gun nests excavated on the forward slope, the NKPA defenders also dug deep holes with overhead cover just over the crest of the ridge on the reverse slope where they were well protected from direct Marine fire. To the rear, concealed in the hills and hollows, 82mm medium and 120mm heavy mortars were registered on the approaches. Chang rallied his junior leaders, telling them that intelligence had revealed that they would be facing American Marines and would thus gain the honor of being the first NKPA unit to defeat them. He stressed the advantages of the terrain and positions they held. His speech ended with a thinly veiled threat that there would be no retreat and that he himself would take action against any man who showed weakness (Geer 1952: 59).

With the road on their right being the boundary for the zone held by the US Army's 9th RCT and no time to reconnoiter or probe the swampy southern flank of the NKPA defenses, the Marines were left with no option but to conduct a frontal assault. To retain strength and depth, the 5th Marine Regiment would mount its attacks in a column of rifle battalions. Lieutenant Colonel Harold S. Roise's 2/5 Marines would take Objective 1 (Obong-ni Ridge), 1/5 Marines would then pass through to take Objective 2 (Hill 207), and 3/5 Marines would leapfrog through to attack Objective 3 (Hill 311).

From the Observation Hill area, 2/5 Marines prepared to jump off at 0800hrs. While the phrase "battalion assault" conveys an image of a massive wave of men charging, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade was still short one rifle battalion per infantry regiment and one rifle company per rifle battalion, while the remaining rifle companies had been depleted by casualties sustained during the Saichon Offensive. Thus, this rifle-battalion assault was actually mounted by four understrength rifle platoons, a grand total of only 130 men, leaving two rifle platoons in reserve to exploit any breakthroughs.

Between Hill 109 and Hill 117, weather had eroded a gully down the ridge, exposing a long strip of red clay and shale that made a readily identifiable landmark the Marines called Red Slash Hill. The plan called for Captain Andrew M. Zimmer's Co. D to ascend to the right of the slash while First Lieutenant William Sweeney and Co. E took the left. A 35-minute preparatory bombardment fired by Marine 105mm howitzers impacted mostly long, dropping behind the ridgetop NKPA defenses and doing them little damage. The artillery paused while Corsairs of MAG-33 hit the ridge, but the aircraft had arrived late and only had time for a single pass. With that, time was up and the small Marine assault force rose up, charged across the paddies, and began their ascent of the hill. As they climbed, all hell broke loose as the advancing troops were targeted with mortar rounds, heavy small-arms fire from the top, and punishing long-range machine-gun fire from the right flank. Despite this, the Marines just kept going.

Marines advancing up yet another hot, dry, barren South Korean hillside take cover near the crest as NKPA mortar fire erupts directly in front of them. In a report dated September 16, 1950, US Marine Corps Intelligence noted, "North Korean mortar fire is very accurate. Mortars employed are 60, 82 and 120mm, which are usually mounted in carefully concealed emplacements on high ground overlooking friendly positions." (NARA)

Watching from the 4.2in mortar positions on Observation Hill, Sergeant Lester M. Fulcher said the attackers moved, "always upward by fire and maneuver, roll under a bush or other ground cover … quickly catch a few breaths, then get up and charge upward a few more precious yards" (quoted in Chapin 2002: 192). NKPA heavy-machine-gun positions on the hill above Tugok were taking the heaviest toll on Co. D, firing on the Marines from the right and rear as they emerged onto the barren slope. Requests for artillery fire to silence the NKPA machine guns were denied because the target lay in the 9th RCT's zone and the machine guns were out of range of Co. D's own 60mm mortars, so the galling machine-gun fire continued. The Marines of Co. E suffered a similar problem as NKPA heavy machine guns atop Hill 147 and Hill 153 poured enfilade fire the length of their skirmish lines. All the while, NKPA smalls-arms fire and grenades came down on both rifle companies from the ridge crest above them. The two reserve rifle platoons were committed as the attack began to bog down.

On the left, with the NKPA's hilltop flanking fire suppressed by the reserve rifle platoon and the battalion 81mm mortars, 1st Platoon, Co. E clawed its way farther up the slope and prepared to make a final assault on the ridgetop. At that moment, friendly artillery fire dropped short, spraying the Marine skirmish line with white phosphorus and sending them reeling back down to cover.

On the right, 3d Platoon, Co. D, led by Second Lieutenant Michael J. Shinka, actually reached the ridgetop and took Hill 109. A squad of NKPA infantry from the reverse slope counterattacked but was stopped in its tracks by Marine rifle fire. Lashed by small-arms, machine-gun, and mortar fire, 3d Platoon had been reduced to only 15 able-bodied men. With ammunition nearly exhausted and 3d Platoon too isolated to be reinforced, Shinka pulled his men back down the hill to the nearest cover, a deep gully. By the time the

Obong-ni Ridge, August 17, 1950

Obong-ni Ridge was the main defensive line of the 4th "Seoul" Division when US Army and Marine Corps units counterattacked to eliminate the so-called Naktong Bulge, a bridgehead the NKPA had established that threatened to pierce the Pusan Perimeter. It was defended by the 18th Regiment, reinforced with an additional rifle battalion from the 16th Regiment and supported by medium and heavy mortars. The defenders excavated two rows of defensive positions. On the forward slope facing the enemy were open firing positions and trenches. On the reverse slope of the steep, knife-edged ridge, deeper foxholes with undercut shelters and some bunkers with overhead cover were excavated. When subjected to artillery bombardment or aerial attack, the NKPA infantrymen could quickly fall back into the latter positions and be well-protected. In the foreground, a machine-gunner fires a 7.62mm Degtyaryov DPM light machine gun while a comrade hurls F-1 fragmentation grenades. A rifleman fires a standard-issue 7.62mm Mosin-Nagant M1891/30 bolt-action rifle while a gunner loads a fresh 71-round drum magazine into his 7.62mm PPSh-41 submachine gun.

Marines reached it, 3d Platoon consisted of only six men still on their feet, soon reduced to five when Shinka was hit twice while attempting to pull a wounded Marine to safety. He survived and was awarded the Bronze Star.

By noon the remnants of 2/5 Marines, still clinging to cover halfway up the fire-ravaged slopes, were spent. Of the 240 men who had started up the ridge that morning, 142 were dead or wounded, leaving only 98 able-bodied Marines on the ridge. Murray ordered the battered survivors to withdraw and had to commit 1/5 Marines to pass through and renew the attack.

This time, preparatory fires were significantly increased. The artillerymen of 1/11 Marines poured everything they had onto the ridge, pausing their fire only long enough for the Corsairs of MAG-33 to conduct air strikes with their cannons, rockets, and bombs. The US Army's 9th RCT simultaneously launched its attack on the hills north of the road toward Tugok where the NKPA's deadly flanking machine guns lay. On the valley floor, the supporting M26 Pershing tanks of Second Lieutenant Granville G. Sweet's 3d Platoon, Co. A, 1st Marine Tank Battalion spread out and laid direct fire on anything that moved atop the ridge with their 90mm main guns and .50-caliber heavy machine guns, concentrating on knocking out the NKPA's crew-served heavy weapons.

Although they had repelled and cut up 2/5 Marines, the effort had cost the rifle companies of the NKPA's 18th Regiment dearly. The morning's losses included some 600 North Korean casualties, many of their crew-served weapons, and large amounts of ammunition. Medical supplies were completely exhausted. Nonetheless, the rifle companies continued to put up fierce resistance as the next wave of Marines attacked the ridge.

Lieutenant Colonel George R. Newton's 1/5 Marines launched its attack with Captain John L. Tobin's Co. B to the right of Red Slash Hill and Captain John Stevens' Co. A on the left. As Tobin tried to brief his platoon leaders on the attack route, he was hit in the chest and arm by a burst of NKPA machine-gun fire. His executive officer, First Lieutenant Francis I. "Ike" Fenton, took command of the company. Two short minutes later, Co. B jumped off with its 1st and 2d platoons attacking on line with the 3d Platoon in support. The advance quickly ground to a halt, however, as the Marines were pinned down by an intense hail of NKPA small-arms fire that mortally wounded 2nd Platoon's First Lieutenant David S. Taylor, who was posthumously awarded the Silver Star.

Below Observation Hill, an M26 Pershing tank of Second Lieutenant Granville G. Sweet's 3d Platoon, Co. A, 1st Marine Tank Battalion, fires its 90mm main gun at an NKPA machine-gun nest on Obong-ni Ridge. Supporting the afternoon attack, the 3d Platoon was credited with destroying 14 NKPA antitank weapons and multiple machine-gun positions. Collectively, the 3d Platoon's four tanks took 23 hits from NKPA 14.5mm antitank rifles but sustained no serious damage. (NARA)

Lieutenant Nick Schryver, commanding 1st Platoon, discerned that the heaviest and most accurate NKPA fire was coming from the far right from machine guns in the village of Tugok itself. Contacting 1/5 Marines' Weapons Company, Schryver was able to direct the fire of the battalion's 81mm mortars onto the target. A 20-minute bombardment silenced most of the NKPA flanking fire. With covering fire provided by the mortars, Schryver was able to lead 1st Platoon westward around the northernmost spur of the ridge, effectively flanking the 18th Regiment's line. The rifle platoon launched a final assault that carried it up and over Hill 102, taking it from the NKPA at 1710hrs.

This success secured 2d Platoon's flank while Co. B's machine guns poured bullets into the NKPA positions atop Hill 117 and Hill 143, effectively suppressing much of the enemy's fire. After clawing its way up a draw as fast as possible, 2d Platoon was able to seize Hill 109 15 minutes later. Both rifle companies consolidated and dug in to hold the ground they had taken.

On the left, Co. A had attacked and initially made good progress halfway up the slope, at which point the summit of the ridge erupted with NKPA rifle and machine-gun fire. Leading 1st Platoon up the draw between Hill 109

Marines advance up another barren ridgetop past the weapons and bodies of NKPA soldiers who had died defending the ridge. The photograph is dated August 18, 1950, suggesting that these are men of 3/5 Marines on Objective 2, Hill 207, the next prominent height west of Obong-ni Ridge. (NARA)

OPPOSITE
As always, US Marine Corps aviation assets provided crucial close air support. On the morning of August 18, 1950, to take the crest of Hill 117 where four stubborn NKPA machine-gun nests held out, Captain John Stevens of Co. A, 1/5 Marines requested an air strike at 0734hrs. At 0748hrs a Corsair fighter-bomber dropped a 500lb bomb directly onto the target only 100yd in front of the nearest Marines, enabling them to capture the hill immediately afterward. (NARA)

and Hill 117, First Lieutenant Robert C. Sebilian was one of the first to be hit, resulting in one of his legs being shattered by a machine-gun bullet. Technical Sergeant Orval F. McMullen took command and continued to lead 1st Platoon upward. The Marines reached the saddle between Hill 109 and Hill 117 just as 2d Platoon, Co. B overran Hill 109. A final assault to capture Hill 117, however, was halted and pinned down by NKPA fire and grenades from the crest.

On the Marines' far left, Second Lieutenant Thomas H. Johnston's 2d Platoon was struggling up the draw between Hill 117 and Hill 143 in the face of heavy NKPA fire that had already cut 2d Platoon's numbers in half. Johnston was seen actually reaching the top where he engaged the enemy defenders in a one-man battle until he was cut down. The rifle platoon had been reduced to the size of a squad when it backed down and dug in.

Near dusk the Marines atop Hill 102 observed and reported an enemy counterattack. From the west, four T-34-85 tanks of the 2nd Battalion, 109th Tank Regiment came rumbling up the road past Finger Ridge leading a company-sized element of infantry from the 18th Regiment. An air strike knocked out one of the T-34-85s and scattered the NKPA infantry formation to cover, but the remaining tanks rumbled onward unsupported as they had done countless times before.

Where the road described a long curve around Hill 125, the Marines were preparing a hot reception. Bazooka teams overlooked the road from the north on Hill 125 and a platoon of 75mm recoilless rifles covered it from the south on Observation Hill. The four M26 Pershing tanks of 3d Platoon, Co. A, which had pulled back to refuel and re-arm, were rushed back up the road to meet the NKPA armor at a narrow defile. From atop Hill 102, Fenton and Co. B had ringside seats from which to observe the action:

As the first [T-34-85] tank rounded the corner down toward the 1st Battalion CP [command post], it was met by 3.5" rocket fire from the anti-tank assault section, and fire from our 75-mm recoilless weapons in position on the high ground on either side of the road. The tank was knocked out, and the second tank immediately came up and tried to go around it. The second, too, was hit in the track and skidded off the road. Our M-26 tanks finished him off. The third tank made the same mistake that the second tank made. He, too, tried to go around the other two tanks. One of our M-26 tanks hit this third tank with a direct hit. All three of these tanks were finished off by our M-26 platoon. (Quoted in Chapin 2002: 44)

On the other side of Obong-ni Ridge, where his regiment still held four out of six hilltops, Colonel Chang Ky Dok had been forbidden permission to withdraw and had only one option left: a counterattack to drive the Marines off their own hilltops. Making use of a serviceable SCR-300 backpack radio previously captured from a US Army unit, one English-speaking NKPA radio operator had been monitoring the Marine radio frequencies. From this source, he knew where the junction between the defenses of Co. A and

Co. B lay and the location of Co. A's 60mm mortar section concealed in a gully. At 2200hrs, NKPA mortars of all sizes fired an intense barrage of white phosphorus shells into the gully, killing or wounding nearly every man in the Marine mortar section.

Then the ridge again became fairly quiet until 0230hrs on August 18, when a green flare arced into the night sky. Covered by heavy automatic weapons fire from Hill 117 and infiltrators throwing showers of grenades, NKPA infantry attacked all along the perimeter of both Marine rifle companies, but the main thrust was directed precisely against the junction between the two. The Marines fired everything they had and called down heavy artillery barrages while their own 81mm mortars lit the sky with parachute flares. The Marine line between Co. A and Co. B was punctured, but only a single squad of NKPA infantry tried to exploit the breach. Desperate close-in fighting raged throughout the early-morning hours, but by dawn the NKPA attack was spent and the Marines still held their hilltops.

Despite a night without sleep, at 0700hrs on August 18 the men of 1/5 Marines renewed their attacks against Hill 117, from which four NKPA heavy machine guns opened up on them. An air strike from MAG-33 was requested at 0734hrs and at 0748hrs a Corsair precisely dropped a 500lb bomb directly onto the crest of Hill 117, wiping out the NKPA defenders but also killing a Marine rifleman. The Marines of Co. A charged the hill and captured it by 0748hrs.

After a brief pause to consolidate, Co. A continued a leapfrog series of attacks against each remaining enemy-held hilltop in succession southward down the ridge. NKPA resistance quickly melted away, with company-sized elements breaking and fleeing. Firing down the reverse slope, Marines atop the ridge chewed up one NKPA rifle company's infantry in column of fours with small-arms fire and called down artillery and air strikes on other fleeing elements of the enemy. Sifting through the blackened North Korean positions on the ridge, 1/5 Marines tallied up 18 enemy heavy machine guns captured or destroyed as well as 25 light machine guns, 63 submachine guns, eight antitank rifles, and large stocks of ammunition and grenades.

The capture of Objective 1 soon led to the fall of Objective 2, Hill 207, at the hands of 3/5 Marines while the four US Army RCTs continued their attacks along the remainder of the 4th Division's entire line. The retreat of small NKPA units suddenly turned into a widespread and panicked rout as the shattered remnants of the 4th Division fled back to the Naktong River. Victory, the US Marine Corps history noted, turned into a slaughter as aircraft, artillery, mortars of all sizes, tanks, and machine guns lashed the sudden plethora of fleeing targets. By the morning of August 19, the Naktong Bulge bridgehead had been eliminated entirely. The US Army history concluded, "The destruction, for all practical purposes, of the N.K. 4th Division in the battle of the Naktong Bulge was the greatest setback suffered thus far by the North Korean Army. The 4th Division never recovered from this battle until after the Chinese entered the war and it was reconstituted" (Appleman 1961: 318).

OPPOSITE
As the sun beats down, two weary Marines identified as PFC Harold R. Bates (left) and PFC Richard N. Martin take a much-needed pause to rehydrate after having fought to the top of an unnamed ridge during the fighting to eliminate the Naktong Bulge. Martin wears US Marine Corps leggings, which were usually well faded, leading to North Korean soldiers calling the Marines "Yellow-legs." (NH 96991 courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command)

Seoul

September 25–27, 1950

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Even as the Pusan Perimeter was still holding on by its fingernails, General MacArthur was planning a decisive counterstrike to tip the balance of the war entirely. He envisioned a strong, surprise amphibious landing at a point along the Korean peninsula that would sever NKPA lines of supply and communication, trap the bulk of its combat-ready forces in the south, and open the way for an all-out counteroffensive. For this operation, MacArthur was absolutely insistent he would need a reactivated 1st Marine Division in its entirety. The Joint Chiefs of Staff did not believe a US Marine Corps infantry division could be raised and made combat ready before December at the earliest, but when the go-ahead was given the US Marine Corps again responded with astonishing speed.

Commandant of the Marine Corps General Clifton B. Cates had already formulated plans to bring the US Marine Corps back up to strength. Major General Oliver P. Smith was appointed to command the 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, where fewer than 3,500 active-duty Marines remained. The skeletal remnants of the 2d Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, were sent to Camp Pendleton to be re-designated as 1st Marine Division units. All possible regulars were combed out of postings around the world and at sea with the US Navy. President Truman and Congress approved the call-up of the Marine Reserves on July 19, 1950.

The US Marine Corps Organized Reserve, 33,527 men strong in 1950, was similar to the National Guard. They were organized and equipped at company level, conducted weekly training days or nights at their local armory, and did 2–3 weeks of active-duty training once per summer. These Reserves were often called up by company (infantry, engineer, amphibious tractor)

This photograph, taken by *New York Herald Tribune* correspondent Marguerite Higgins, is perhaps the most iconic image of the Inchon landing. Only minutes before his death, First Lieutenant Baldomero López leads his platoon from Co. A, 1/5 Marines over the sea wall at Red Beach. He was killed on September 15, 1950 when he hurled himself on top of a live grenade and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. (NARA)

to fill organizational gaps in the new division. The Volunteer Marine Corps Reserve consisted of 90,000 men, almost all of whom were World War II veterans who had returned to civilian life but were subject to call-up back to active duty in times of national emergency. These Reservists were called up individually and used to fill the ranks of the re-forming units.

With this manpower, the 1st and 7th Marine regiments were reactivated. Command of the 1st Marine Regiment went to the legendary Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, who had been badgering US Marine Corps headquarters for the job since the war began, while Colonel Homer L. Litzenberg, Jr., took command of the 7th Marine Regiment. The ground units of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade would be reincorporated into the 1st Marine Division when it reached Korea. In similar fashion, Organized Reserve fighter and ground control squadrons were being rushed to MCAS El Toro to flesh out the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.

Code-named Operation *Chromite*, MacArthur's plan called for an amphibious landing at the port of Inchon on the west coast of Korea. Nearly everyone else from the Joint Chiefs of Staff on down was skeptical about Inchon. The approaches were two restricted and easily mined or blocked passages with strong currents, the actual anchorage was rather small, the harbor was surrounded by sea walls, and the tides were so extreme that landings could only be made twice per day near high tide. Nonetheless, Inchon was MacArthur's choice and he got his way.

For the landings, the 1st Marine Division and the US Army's 7th Infantry Division were combined to form X Corps, a ground command separate from and independent of Lieutenant General Walker's Eighth Army. Despite the considerable expertise in amphibious assaults garnered by the US Marine

Corps during the Pacific Campaign of World War II, command of X Corps and the Inchon landings was given to the US Army's Major General Edward M. "Ned" Almond, presumably because of his fierce personal loyalty to MacArthur himself.

Despite Inchon's handicaps, the landings were a spectacular success. The port city was held by the NKPA's 226th Independent Marine Regiment and the 2nd Battalion, 918th Coastal Artillery Regiment, for a combined total of around 2,000 North Korean troops. In addition to having the element of surprise, UN forces used preparatory bombardments from sea and air on a massive scale that would decades later be referred to as "shock and awe." The pre-invasion bombardments were so intense and effective that the Marines encountered little organized ground resistance to the landings and quickly mopped up the area.

On September 16, 1950, the 1st and 5th Marine regiments began their march inland toward Seoul, 20 miles away along the highway and railroad network. That morning, six T-34-85 tanks without support tried to counterattack the 5th Marine Regiment but were quickly destroyed by US Marine Corps Corsair fighter-bombers and M26 Pershing tanks. Just before dawn on September 17, another NKPA counterattack mounted by six more tanks with a company of infantry in support met the same fate at the hands of US Marine Corps infantry supported by artillery and M26 Pershing tanks. By nightfall, the advancing 5th Marine Regiment had captured Kimpo Airfield, the largest and most important air base in Korea. Kimpo's runways had suffered little damage. By September 19, UN transport planes were landing supplies there and the following day VMF-212 became the first of many US Marine Corps and US 5th Air Force combat units to operate from the base.

Close to Seoul, Puller's 1st Marine Regiment had to take fortified high ground west of Yongdungpo and then the sprawling industrial suburb city itself. Almond approved Puller's request for the use of unrestricted supporting fires in attacking Yongdungpo itself, resulting in widespread destruction of the city. Lieutenant Colonel Murray's 5th Marine Regiment faced an even tougher obstacle en route to Seoul, the NKPA's main line of resistance, a heavily fortified jumbled mass of hills and ridges that guarded the western approaches to the city. Even with heavy artillery and close air support it took three bloody days and nights of hard fighting and heavy casualties to overwhelm the NKPA defenses. Other obstacles were overcome, including an assault crossing of the Han River, so that by September 25, all three infantry regiments of the 1st Marine Division were aligned north of the Han along the western and southwestern outskirts of Seoul, ready for the final assault.

The attack plan called for the 1st Marine Regiment, with an attached ROK Marine battalion, to orient on Ma Po Boulevard and attack into Seoul from the south through a zone of action 1–1½ miles wide to a final depth of 6 miles. Objectives within this zone included Seoul's main business and hotel districts, main train station, foreign consulates, city hall, and Duk Soo Palace. From the west, the 5th Marine Regiment and the attached ROK Marine battalion would attack a similar-sized zone to capture objectives that included Government House, a prison, Changdok Palace, and the Royal Gardens. To the northwest, the 7th Marine Regiment, to which was attached the 1st Marines Reconnaissance Company and another ROK Marine battalion,

The NKPA had some antiaircraft-artillery regiments assigned to protect large, stationary strategic targets in rear areas and the Fatherland. They were equipped with heavier weapons like this 85mm M1939 heavy antiaircraft gun as well as 37mm M1939 61-K automatic cannon and 12.7mm DShK-38 heavy machine guns. The 19th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment in Seoul took a toll on US Marine Corps Corsair fighter-bombers. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 37034)

was supposed to guard the 1st Marine Division's left flank and take the high ground on both sides of the Seoul–Kaesong Highway to block off NKPA escape routes. To the southeast, the US Army's 32d Infantry Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division and the ROK Army's 17th Infantry Regiment were poised to cross the Han River and begin their own advance into the capital city from that direction.

Since the news of the Inchon landings, the NKPA command had reacted quickly to bolster their manpower in Seoul with whatever forces could be found. The result was a largely foot-mobile infantry force with modest tank support and capable artillery assets, but lacking any air assets. Many units were small, regimental-sized or smaller, and composed of recently conscripted or poorly trained men or assembled from rear area and support troops. Others were well-trained and -equipped veteran formations. In Seoul itself major NKPA units were elements of the 17th Division, the 19th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment, the 513th Artillery Regiment, and the 10th Railroad Regiment. Armor initially consisted of some 18 T-34-85 tanks of the inexperienced 42nd Mechanized Regiment, but these numbers were soon bolstered by the 105th Armored Brigade, recalled from its journey to the Pusan Perimeter, and the newly created 43rd Tank Regiment was transferred from Wonson with an additional 10–15 tanks.

The remnants of the experienced units which had defended the approaches to Seoul fell back to the city to add to its defenses. These included, from the Northwest Approaches, the 25th Brigade, 78th Independent Infantry Regiment, and the Seoul City Regiment. Pushed out of Yongdungpo by Puller's Marines were the 3rd Regiment, 9th Division, and elements from the 18th and 87th divisions. At the time of the Inchon landing there were perhaps 10,000 NKPA troops of all kinds in Seoul, but by the time the city itself was reached this number had doubled.

Seoul, September 25–27, 1950

MAP KEY

1 September 25: The 1st Marine Regiment attacks Seoul from the southwest and engages in the "Battle of the Barricades" to reach and then clear Ma Po Boulevard, the main major thoroughfare accessing the heart of the city. Fanatical NKPA resistance limits the 1st Marine Regiment's advance to only 2,000yd the first day.

2 September 25: The 5th Marine Regiment also fights house-to-house and street-to-street while advancing into Seoul from the northwest.

3 September 25: As yet untested in battle as a unit, the reservists of the 7th Marine Regiment are tasked with protecting the 5th Marine Regiment's flank and advancing to the southeast in order to cut off the Seoul–Uijongbu highway, the NKPA's main route for reinforcement and retreat.

4 September 25: The US Army's 32d Infantry Regiment and the ROK Army's 17th Infantry Regiment attack from the south. They complete their crossing of the Han River and by late afternoon the 32d Infantry Regiment has captured its main objective, Nam-San or South Mountain, a dominating 900ft height offering observation of the whole city.

5 Night of September 25/26: Major General Edward M. "Ned" Almond, commanding general X Corps, announces that NKPA forces are fleeing the city and orders the Marines to make an immediate and risky nighttime attack into the heart of Seoul. Far from fleeing, less than one hour later the NKPA launches two major counterattacks against the Marines, the heaviest mounted by the 25th Brigade and led by T-34-85 tanks directly down Ma Po Boulevard. With heavy artillery support, the Marines finally beat back both attacks in battles that last the entire night.

6 Early morning, September 26: Just before dawn, other NKPA units mount a fierce counterattack against the 32d Infantry Regiment on Nam-San. One US Army rifle company is overrun, but the regiment holds and eventually breaks up the attack, inflicting heavy losses on the NKPA.

7 September 26: Despite Almond's proclamation that Seoul had been captured the previous day, all Marine, US Army, and ROK units spend the day engaged in heavy street-to-street fighting against continued stubborn NKPA resistance. By nightfall, half of the city is in UN hands.

8 Night of September 26/27: The NKPA withdraws surviving elements of the 18th Division north up the highway toward Uijongbu before that artery is fully severed by the 7th Marine Regiment. It is the only NKPA unit to be salvaged relatively intact from the battle. Other NKPA units in the city are ordered to continue fighting for every yard.

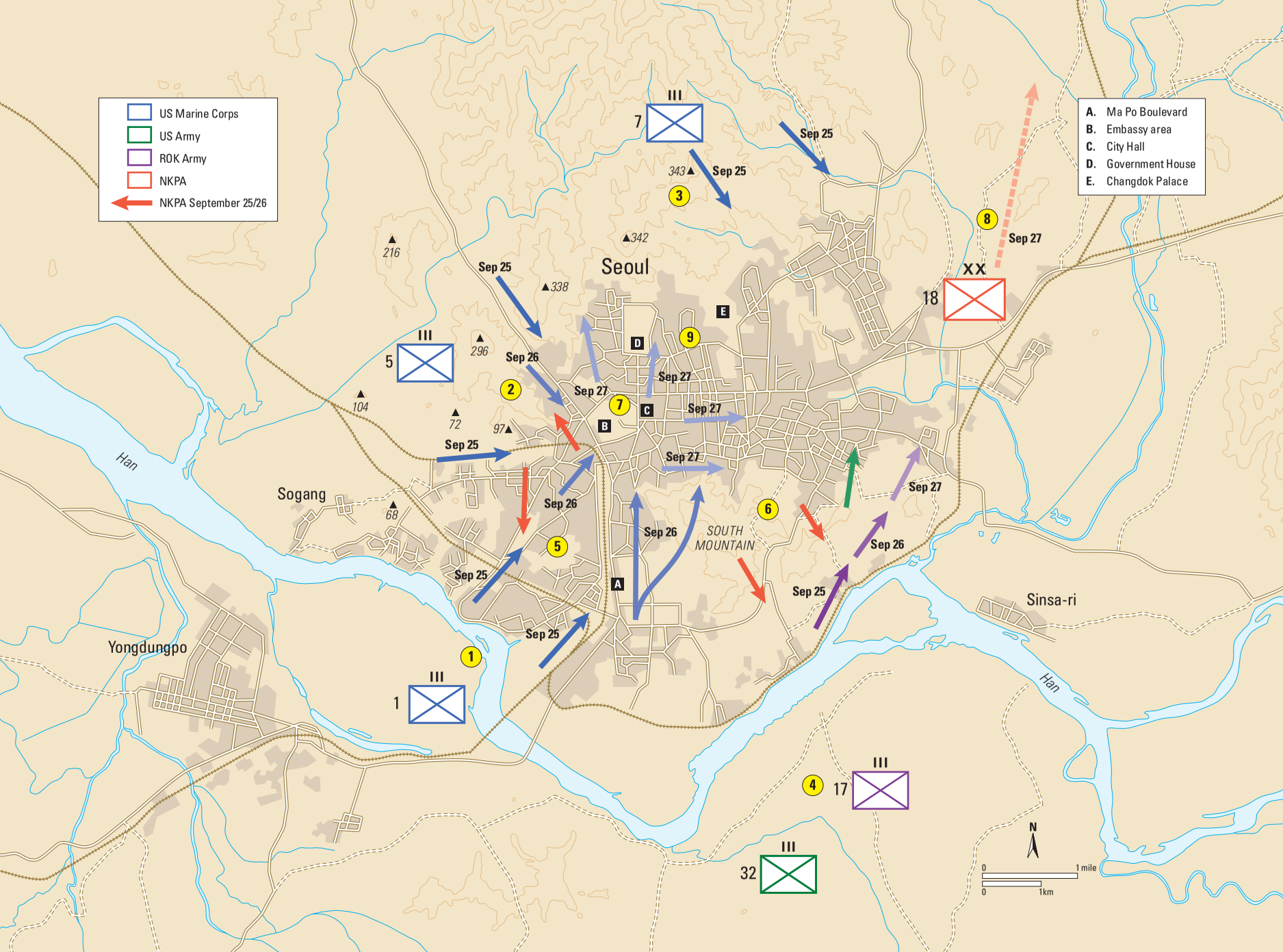
9 September 27: The day once more begins with stout, organized NKPA resistance and heavy fighting, but by the end of the day combat has been reduced to mopping up small and isolated NKPA units. That afternoon, troops of the 1st Marine Regiment raise the flag over the US embassy and the 5th and 7th Marine regiments link up to recapture Government House.

Battlefield environment

In January 1950, Seoul was the fifth-largest city in East Asia with a population of well over 1 million people. Located in a wide basin surrounded and dominated by steep hills, the city had been settled for many centuries. Its buildings were a mixture of ancient and modern architecture ranging from the latest concrete multistory office buildings to a 500-year-old palace.

The main thoroughfare accessing the heart of the city was Ma Po Boulevard, a broad route lined with shady sycamore trees and bordered by 2–3-story masonry buildings, walled compounds, churches, and hospitals, and simple groceries and tea shops. It passed Seoul's large main rail station and ended at Duk Soo Palace. The main roads through Seoul were wide, paved, and straight, but once off them the secondary roads often became confined, twisting labyrinths, too narrow for military vehicles and all too often winding up in dead-ends. Although hundreds of thousands of refugees had fled the city during the NKPA invasion in June 1950, hundreds of thousands of civilians still remained living in the city, although neither side could really come up with an accurate estimate of just how many people there actually were.

In a photograph originally captioned "Leathernecks pause for a smoke," the destruction suffered by Seoul is readily apparent. South Korea's capital city would change hands twice more before the conflict ended. (NARA)


US Marine Corps
US Army
ROK Army
NKPA
NKPA September 25/26
A. Ma Po Boulevard
B. Embassy area
C. City Hall
D. Government House
E. Changdok Palace
Seoul
Sogang
Yongdungpo
Sinsa-ri
SOUTH MOUNTAIN
Han
Han
216
338
342
343
296
104
72
97
68
Sep 25
Sep 26
Sep 27
III
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INTO COMBAT

Detailed intelligence regarding Seoul's NKPA defenses was so scarce that the Marines' initial attacks were essentially urban movements-to-contact. When contact was made, it was quickly discovered that the NKPA defenses centered on a seemingly endless series of barricades. The fight for Seoul would soon become known as the "Battle of the Barricades."

The barricades had been erected across street intersections on all the major avenues and thoroughfares accessing the city, blocking the entire width of the street, about 400–600yd apart. Built by large numbers of Seoul civilians used as forced labor, they were constructed primarily of large jute bags used to store rice, filled with dirt and sand. Overturned street cars, vehicles, steel rails, large chunks of masonry, and other items were built into them as well until they were about 8ft high and 6ft thick, and tied into adjacent buildings, which were also fortified and reinforced. Each barricade was defended by small arms, machine guns, and antitank rifles and guns. The area in front of each barricade was sewn primarily with antitank mines. Supporting mortars and artillery were registered on the approach.

Although the NKPA defenses were formidable, two flaws in their dispositions helped to make the tough job of attacking them a bit more feasible. First, the barricades and strongholds themselves stood alone; they were too far apart to offer mutual supporting fires when attacked. Secondly, NKPA artillery and mortars had been scattered in penny packets in support of individual strongpoints and communications were too poor to enable them to mass their combined fire into intense concentrations on a single target.

In 1950, the US Marine Corps had no real official doctrine or training in what is known today as Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT). The Marines learned this new style of fighting "on-the-job," with errors and mistakes paid for in blood. Yet they developed the tactics and techniques necessary very quickly under the circumstances. Combined-arms teamwork was essential for the Marine attack upon Seoul and a typical pattern emerged to reduce the barricades.

The "softening up" usually began with Marine Corsairs bombing, strafing, and rocketing the target from above. US Marine Corps fighter squadrons were already operating from Kimpo Airfield, giving them rapid turnaround times for re-fueling and re-arming, and they were prepared to offer close air support almost immediately during daylight hours. Even in the confusion and sprawl of the urban battlefield, air strikes by the Corsairs were still called in quite effectively. Although bombs and napalm were still used on some targets, in the confines of the city streets – where the opponents were often engaged at distances measured in feet rather than yards – strafing runs with their four 20mm cannon and attacks with 5in HVARs came to be favored due to the precision with which experienced pilots could deliver these weapons. Afterward, the Corsairs would orbit aloft, ready to pounce on any NKPA artillery pieces or mortars that revealed themselves by firing in support of the barricades' defenders.

The addition of the NKPA's 19th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment to Seoul's defenses made the Marine pilots' jobs more difficult and dangerous. Originally 1,200 strong, the regiment had lost a considerable number of men

Hastily rerouted and assembled NKPA units mounted costly defenses and counterattacks to delay the UN advance from Inchon to Seoul. Here a squad, well camouflaged against aerial observation as always, takes advantage of a stream bed as a trench. Beyond the squad is an antitank-rifle team with a PTRD-41. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 48926)

and guns while providing air defenses in the hard-fought battle for the hilly main line of defense northwest of the city. Now its subunits had withdrawn into the city itself and concentrated their remaining weapons behind the barricade defenses in an effort to make downtown Seoul a "flak trap" for low-level enemy aircraft. In addition to the usual 12.7mm DShK-38 heavy machine guns, the 19th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment was also equipped with single-barreled 37mm M1939 61-K automatic cannon, effective Soviet rapid-fire air-defense weapons based on the Swedish 40mm Bofors gun. NKPA antiaircraft fire in Seoul claimed 11 US Marine Corps aircraft at the cost of seven aircrew killed.

After the air strikes, concentrations of supporting artillery and mortar fire were called down upon the barricades. Although they were far beyond the range of supporting naval gunfire, by now the ground troops of X Corps had amassed considerable artillery firepower of their own. The 11th Marine Regiment mustered 54 towed 105mm howitzers and 18 towed 155mm howitzers. The US and ROK Army assets included within the X Corps elements set to attack Seoul were supported by an additional 36 towed 105mm howitzers and a mixture of 54 towed and self-propelled 155mm howitzers.

While artillery suppressed the defenders, the tank–infantry teams moved up into direct fire positions. The lion's share of the destruction fell to the tanks, which would methodically smash crew-served weapon positions and strongpoints with precisely aimed high-explosive shells from their main guns. The roles from the first weeks of the war were now reversed as projectiles from the NKPA's antitank weapons, 14.5mm antitank rifles, and 45mm antitank guns, bounced futilely off the thick armor of the M26 Pershing tanks.

While the tanks did their deadly work, the accompanying infantrymen protected them against close-range enemy threats with small-arms fire. The men of 2/1 Marines encountered NKPA "suicide squads," small groups or

Street fighting in Seoul, September 25, 1950

US Marine Corps view: Men of the 1st Marine Regiment attack yet another NKPA defensive barricade, which were encountered every few hundred meters. Close coordination between tanks and infantry proved to be the most important element in reducing these strongpoints. On the right, a Marine infantry officer uses the field telephone mounted on the rear corner of an M26 Pershing tank to direct the crew onto a target. Marine riflemen armed with M1 rifles and a Browning Automatic Rifle provide suppressive fire as a fire team advances behind the cover of another M26, alert to protect the tank in turn from "suicide squads" armed with satchel charges or Molotov cocktails. Even within the confusing confines of this major urban center, close air support still proved effective, indicated by the Corsair fighter-bomber upper right. Reducing each strongpoint delayed UN forces by 45–60 minutes and took a steady toll in casualties, while the supporting firepower used caused substantial damage to parts of the city.

NKPA view: Soldiers of the 17th Division defend one of the many barricade strongpoints constructed to block every major street intersection within the city of Seoul. The barricades were constructed primarily of jute rice bags filled with sand and dirt to form a wall roughly 8ft high and 6ft thick, reinforced with various other debris. The approaches were mined and the surrounding buildings were turned into defensive strongpoints to cover the obstacles with direct fire. This group has fortified the second floor of a stoutly constructed modern building of brick and masonry. On the left, a machine-gun team fires the standard NKPA heavy machine gun, the Soviet 7.62mm M1910 Maxim. A soldier in the foreground is armed with a 7.62mm PPSh-41 submachine gun. To the right, an antitank-rifle team attempts to disable advancing enemy tanks with their 14.5mm PTRD-41, a weapon which proved ineffective against the Marines' new M26 Pershing tanks. While some barricades were supported by a few individual mortars or artillery pieces, the lack of radio communications prevented the defenders from calling in concentrated artillery fire.

Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller (right) had ceaselessly badgered US Marine Corps Headquarters to give him command of his World War II regiment, the 1st Marines, for the Inchon operation. A legendary figure in the US Marine Corps, he was awarded five Navy Crosses during his 37-year career. (NH 93034 courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command)

even individuals who darted out of cover and attempted to hurl large satchel charges full of high explosives onto the tanks. The first such attack took the Marines by surprise and the NKPA sapper exploded his charge on the rear engine deck of a flamethrower-equipped M4A3R5 medium tank; the crew escaped but the vehicle was destroyed. Several more attempts were made after that, but the Marine riflemen were ready and cut down the suicide squads the moment they appeared. Marine snipers and recoilless-rifle crews took to rooftops that offered good vantage points of the ground ahead and picked off any visible threats to the assault teams with precision long-range fire. Targets included the many enemy rooftop snipers and antitank-assault squads that could hurl Soviet-made shaped-charge HEAT antitank grenades and Molotov cocktails down upon the thinner top armor of the tanks.

Covered by tank guns and infantry small arms, engineers moved forward to clear a breach lane through the antitank mines or blow particularly formidable obstacles with demolition charges. When a lane had been cleared, the tanks could roll forward, blast apart the barricade itself with a few well-placed main-gun high-explosive rounds, and then smash their way through, creating an opening. Hugging the rear of the tanks, the infantrymen surged forward, some pouring through the gap to remain with the tanks while other squads kicked down doors and cleared the enemy from buildings on either side of the street.

Tank–infantry coordination was particularly important because a tank crew's vision is limited when the tank is "buttoned up." A tank driver could potentially run over a friendly rifleman without even knowing it, and an infantryman too close to the muzzle blast of an M26 Pershing's 90mm gun when it fired could be deafened, knocked out, or even killed. The Marines'

Pershing and Sherman tanks mounted a field telephone in a metal box on the right rear corner of the hull – a development of World War II – so that supporting infantry could communicate directly with the tank crews.

Staff Sergeant Chester Bair was a US Army tanker whose tank company of the 32d Infantry Regiment supported both US Army and Marine infantry during the fight for Seoul, and he had high praise for this tank–infantry coordination:

> The Marines used tanks very well. They would use the telephone located on the rear of each tank which talked to the commander inside. In this way the Marines acted as our eyes. Buttoned up inside, depending on a periscope, our vision was limited. Working outside in the streets, the Marines tremendously increased our ability to close with the enemy and to direct our firepower. (Knox 1985: 294)

Although their methods were effective and soon refined, reducing the barricades still remained a tough job that consumed time, ammunition, and men. Each barricade took the Marine, US Army, and ROK Army tank–infantry teams 45–60 minutes to destroy. Then, just a few hundred yards down the street, there would be another barricade and the process would have to begin all over again. Puller himself called the process "agonizingly slow" (Montross & Canzona 1954: 272). After the first full day of such fighting, reducing barricades one by one in the face of fanatical NKPA resistance, the two lead battalions of Puller's 1st Marine Regiment on a mile-wide front had advanced only 2,000yd into the heart of the city on September 25. At the end of a long, hard day, the Marines dug in to hold their positions for the night.

A single US air observer reported "enemy" fleeing Seoul north toward Oijongbu. In the darkness, it was hard to distinguish between enemy units and refugees, but on the basis of this single report Almond determined the NKPA had suddenly broken and was fleeing the city. At 2000hrs, he ordered the stunned Marines to mount an immediate all-out nighttime attack without reconnaissance, rehearsal, or preparation.

In the streets of Seoul, a Marine speaks with the commander of an M4A3(105) medium tank via the field telephone mounted on the rear corner of the hull. Communication and close coordination between US Marine Corps infantry units and supporting tanks was crucial for success in the "Battle of the Barricades." In addition to their new M26 Pershing tanks, the Marine tankers also had a number of older M4A3(105) Shermans; their narrowness proved an asset in the streets, as did the destructive power of their short-barreled 105mm howitzers. (US Marine Corps)

Fortunately, Smith took the time for proper preparations so that his regimental commanders could coordinate their battalions in this risky maneuver. The attack was scheduled to start at 0145hrs after a 15-minute artillery bombardment. Puller judged this bombardment to be insufficient and requested a second fire mission, pushing the jump-off back to 0200hrs. These delays became crucial as the NKPA mounted two large and determined counterattacks against the Marines poised at their jump-off points.

At midnight, a sizable NKPA infantry force – the morning would reveal the bodies of more than 200 North Korean soldiers in front of the Marine positions – mounted a determined attack against Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Taplett's 3/5 Marines. Over the

The NKPA's shortage of fast, modern communications technologies was a major weakness during the 1950 fighting. Although the NKPA was equipped with some Soviet equipment such as this RBN-1 field radio, wireless communications were available only down to the regimental level. This lack of communications prevented the NKPA defenders of Seoul from calling down artillery concentrations from multiple artillery batteries. (MoD MHIM Photo Archives 2509)

radio net came the message from Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Murray: "I'm afraid we'll have to delay pursuit of the 'fleeing enemy' until we see if Tap can beat off this counterattack" (quoted in Alexander 2000: 31).

At 0153hrs, an even larger counterattack hit the 1st Marine Regiment. Like an avalanche, at least one full battalion of the NKPA's 25th Brigade poured straight down Ma Po Boulevard, spearheaded by a dozen T-34-85 tanks and SU-76 self-propelled guns. Bracing to take this attack was Major Edwin H. Simmons of 3/1 Marines' heavy-weapons company. The Marines had blocked and mined a key bridge where Ma Po Boulevard crossed a major tributary stream and taken up defensive positions around it. The defenses were manned by two rifle squads from Co. G bolstered by two heavy-machine-gun sections, a rocket squad with two bazookas, and a section of 75mm recoilless rifles. Behind them, Simmons' 81mm mortar platoon had registered the approaches.

As the leading NKPA tanks roared toward the bridge from the north they opened fire with their 85mm main guns. One of the first shots fired missed Simmons by a matter of inches but killed his radio-operator instantaneously. Grabbing the radio, a shaken Simmons raised the alarm while the defenders opened fire with everything they had. Water-cooled heavy machine guns flayed the North Korean infantry and peppered the advancing T-34-85s and SU-76s – the Marine gunners would fire a record 30,000 rounds that night – harrying their crews and forcing them to "button up," and the bazookas and recoilless rifles destroyed at least one vehicle. In the meantime, Simmons called down all available supporting arms onto the bridge.

The thudding of Simmons' own 81mm mortars was quickly drowned out as three artillery battalions of the 11th Marine Regiment slammed shells home into their 105mm howitzers and unleashed an intense concentration of fire that devastated much of the advancing infantry of the 25th Brigade and brought the NKPA attack to a halt. After 90 minutes, the Marine guns became too hot to continue firing. When the artillery concentration ceased,

the NKPA tanks and assault guns began probing forward against the Marine lines once more.

Within range and listening in on the radio net was the US Army's 31st Field Artillery Battalion, which responded to Simmons' calls with another heavy concentration of fire. The battalion's 155mm howitzers precisely laid some 360 95lb high-explosive shells across the Marines' front. The effects of the artillery fire were devastating. The light of dawn revealed the smoldering wreckage of seven T-34-85 tanks, two SU-76 self-propelled guns, and eight 45mm antitank guns, blown apart by artillery; the Marines estimated that approximately 475 NKPA soldiers lay amid the wreckage, and they captured more than 80 prisoners of war.

Even as the Marines' big fight was tapering off, more of Almond's "fleeing" NKPA troops launched a determined attack of at least battalion strength against the US Army's 32d Infantry Regiment on South Mountain. One American company's positions were completely overrun, but heavy doses of artillery fire and a counterattack by the reserve element drove the NKPA back off the hill, leaving 394 dead behind.

Thus, there was widespread derision the next morning, September 26, when Almond announced to the world via communiqué that Seoul had been recaptured at 1400hrs the previous afternoon, three months to the day since the NKPA invasion had been launched, and concluded that the broken enemy was fleeing the city. One Marine history said:

> In truth the Marines and soldiers would still be fighting for full possession of the capital 48 hours past General Almond's announced liberation date, but the issue was insignificant. The troops viewed the battle from purely a tactical perspective; their corps commander sensed the political ramifications. Of far greater significance at this point was the fact that five infantry regiments with a total lack of experience waging coalition warfare with combined arms in an enormous urban center were nevertheless prevailing against a well-armed, disciplined enemy. (Alexander 2000: 36)

An M2 carbine. The M1 and M2 carbines gained a poor reputation for reliability amid the harsh field conditions in Korea. (Leroy Thompson)

Colonel Lee Jong Kan admitted that the resistance offered by his battalion of the 33rd Regiment lost all cohesion after their first defensive position fell. Although the remnants of his unit fought for three more days, the defense was no longer organized or effective (Peters & Li 2004: 83). Kim Il-sung and the NKPA high command had long since fled back to Pyongyang, communications had collapsed entirely, and the NKPA troops felt they were on their own. In the end it was virtually every man for himself as they sought to escape the city.

The combined Inchon-to-Seoul operation cost the 1st Marine Division 415 men killed, 2,029 wounded, and six missing. The NKPA, however, suffered approximately 14,000 killed and nearly 5,000 taken prisoner.

Between the unrestricted use of UN firepower and a program of deliberate arson by some NKPA commanders, approximately 60 percent of the great city of Seoul lay in ruins by the end of the battle. To this day, the total number of civilian casualties remains unknown. British correspondent from *The Daily Telegraph* Reginald Thompson's words would echo for years: "Few people can have suffered so terrible a liberation" (quoted in Alexander 2000: 24).

Analysis

While all too many US Army personnel were initially contemptuous of the NKPA and its soldiers and were expecting some kind of barefoot peasant rabble, Marine veterans of World War II who had slugged it out with Imperial Japanese forces from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima had no illusions that they would be facing a tough opponent. After the long string of defeats inflicted by the NKPA throughout July and early August 1950, even MacArthur's headquarters expressed respect for their opponents:

> The North Korean infantry man is … a rugged individual accustomed in his ordinary daily life to hardship. His equipment is scant and light; he has one uniform, a hand weapon, and ammunition plus a few personal effects in his pockets. He wears light canvas and rubber shoes in which he can negotiate difficult terrain (mountains, rice paddies, etc.) with more speed and endurance than a soldier equipped by our concepts. (US Army 1950: 2)

Eighth Army headquarters also expressed considerably more respect for the NKPA by 1951: "Enemy tactics were sound and well-executed. Contrary to the popular conception of the enemy as 'a screaming horde,' the NK forces were well-coordinated fighting machines. Enemy attacks showed considerable prior planning and good judgment for the most part. All in all, the Communist Force employed in Korea was a capable opponent which employed sound basic principles of war" (US Army 1951: 128–29).

Despite being well trained and equipped at the start of the war, however, the NKPA still suffered from certain equipment shortcomings in a few key areas that proved to be real handicaps. The lack of antiaircraft weapons to protect field units has already been noted. The lack of effective radio communications beneath regimental level led to a certain tactical rigidity in the smaller units and a delayed reaction time at the command level, where slow communications limited a commander's ability to adapt his plans

rapidly and shift his forces in response to a swiftly changing situation. On June 30, 1950, the Soviet Union's Ambassador to North Korea, Terentii F. Shtykov, sent a secret cable to Moscow noting that almost as soon as the NKPA offensive began the general staff lost communication from top to bottom and before the end of the first day of battle the staff no longer had reliable communications with a single one of its divisions (Wilson Center 2020: 358). Less than a week into the war, Kim Il-sung requested from the Soviets an additional 1,000 radio sets, 3,000 field telephones, and 4,000km (2,485 miles) of wire for the NKPA.

Supply, or the lack thereof, became an increasingly acute problem the farther south down the Korean peninsula the NKPA advanced, even though the average NKPA infantry division needed only about 10 percent of the daily supply tonnage required by the average US Army infantry division. Although UN air attacks to interdict NKPA supply lines were never enough to sever them completely, the flow of supplies was greatly reduced and large amounts were destroyed en route. In particular, trains and trucks were easy targets along a road-and-rail supply route stretching more than 200 miles. Expedients such as ox-carts and human porters could not entirely meet the supply needs of a division in combat. Small-arms and mortar ammunition continued to flow in on the Naktong River, but artillery shells were strictly rationed and only about one-third of NKPA weapon losses could be replaced.

The greatest advantage enjoyed by *all* UN ground forces was their side's air superiority over the battlefield. Even with the advent of Soviet-made Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-15 jet fighters operating from Manchuria later in the war, UN air and sea superiority was never seriously in doubt. Considering that Korea was one large peninsula, control of the seas on three sides of the country was nearly as important as control of the air, and UN naval power was also supreme. Despite this, air power alone was never sufficient to defeat the NKPA, and later the CPVA, single-handedly. Air interdiction campaigns against cities, bridges, rail lines, and roads did not stop large Communist field forces from gathering and striking. Close air support at times inflicted massive casualties and took a heavy toll on heavy weapons and vehicles, but still did not check the NKPA's initial rapid advances on the ground.

Individually, NKPA soldiers were initially quite highly motivated and there can be no doubt that they were conditioned to extraordinary levels of "toughness" in the form of physical fitness and stamina. When it came down to close combat, both sides were evenly matched. The average NKPA rifleman, however, was no match for the average Marine rifleman when it came to marksmanship. In small-arms engagements, the Marines' greater accuracy plus the use of semiautomatic rifles and carbines provided a decided firepower edge. Attempting to compensate for the general, overall lack of accuracy of their small-arms fire by increasing the sheer volume of it via the use of more automatic weapons, especially submachine guns, did not prove successful for the NKPA against its US Marine Corps opponents.

After the battle of Obong-ni Ridge, Marines examine the damage done to two of the T-34-85 tanks destroyed in the fighting. Three tanks were smashed from three sides by 3.5in bazookas, 75mm recoilless rifles, and the 90mm main guns of the Marines' M26 Pershing tanks. The Marine Corps History concluded, "Thus the Brigade shattered the myth of the T-34 in five flaming minutes" (Montross & Canzona 1954: 194). (NARA)

As individuals, American Marines were also physically toughened, although not to the same degree at their opponents. They were also highly motivated, imbued with *esprit de corps*, and usually had the benefit of longer and more comprehensive training. The US Marine Corps tradition that every man was first and foremost a rifleman paid large dividends in the Korean War in particular where, due to the enemy's penchant for infiltration and nighttime attacks, support troops in the rear could suddenly find themselves at the tip of the spear and engaged in infantry combat.

An M45 tank with 105mm howitzer crosses the Kumho River on an underwater bridge built by the North Koreans. The NKPA constructed such a bridge to cross the Naktong River. Sandbags were piled on the river bottom, forming a structure 15ft wide approximately 20in beneath the water's surface. Downstream, a hasty "leaky dam" was also constructed to raise and calm the river water at the bridge itself. (© CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

The NKPA's artillery assets were also quite good and the officers and gun crews of the artillery regiments formed before the war were indeed well-trained. While the 11th Marine Regiment did have NKPA artillery regiments outgunned, it was not the number of tubes that made the difference. The US Marine Corps' Fire Support Coordination Centers and superior wireless communication systems allowed a much faster response time from supporting fires, greater versatility, and the ability to concentrate the massed fire of multiple assets onto a single target. In general, good radio communications also gave each Marine regiment and division greater speed, flexibility, and adaptability when it came to countering enemy blows and exploiting enemy weaknesses.

In the end, there can be little doubt that the US Marines Corps' men, weapons, tactics, and leadership proved to be successful and more than a match even for crack NKPA units such as the 6th and 4th divisions in 1950. Fenton considered his opponents from those divisions to be "well-trained, well-equipped, and well-led" and found their artillery and mortar fire to be good and effective. He and other Marine veterans of World War II

> felt that he wasn't as tenacious or fanatical as the Japanese, but he does press home his advantage until separated from his leaders. Evidently the leaders of the North Koreans held a very big stick over the heads of the foot soldiers. The soldiers obeyed right down to the last word of an order. The only serious fault that I actually found with the North Korean is that he wasn't a very good marksman. (Fenton 1950: 60)

As for the US Marine Corps, Colonel Thomas X. Hammes analyzed the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade's battlefield success and "Fighting Power" for his doctoral thesis. He examined organization, training, leadership, culture, education, and doctrine. His conclusion was that the most vital key to their success was the US Marine Corps' "institutional culture." This included a "culture of remembering" that allowed Marines to understand and prepare for the unchanging aspects of war, while a "culture of learning" helped Marines to improvise and adapt to a new enemy's methods and weapons and the changing character of modern war (Hammes 2008: v).

Aftermath

With the NKPA having committed well over 80 percent of its best combat divisions to breaching the Pusan Perimeter, the UN recapture of Seoul trapped these units in the south and severed all their supply lines. With US and UN reinforcements swelling its ranks, Walker's Eighth Army launched breakout attacks from Pusan. Between the hammer of the Eighth Army and the anvil of X Corps, the cream of the NKPA's divisions were scattered or destroyed.

Once the two major UN commands consolidated, the offensive continued into North Korea. Elements of the ROK Army's 3rd Division were the first UN troops to cross the 38th Parallel on September 30, 1950. By that same date, the NKPA had suffered more than 50,000 casualties and 13,000 prisoners of war.

After the recapture of Seoul, the 1st Marine Division had re-embarked aboard ships and sailed around the Korean peninsula to make another amphibious landing on the east coast at Wonsan, but the rapidly advancing ROK I Corps had already captured the city by land. Landing unopposed, the Marines joined the rest of X Corps in the pursuit northward. Pyongyang had fallen on October 19, 1950 and Kim Il-sung's government fled north into the barren mountains with the few surviving remnants of the NKPA. ROK forces reached the Yalu River on October 26, 1950, and MacArthur was speaking of ending the war by Christmas.

MacArthur, however, refused to believe the growing evidence that the neighboring People's Republic of China had entered the war on the side of North Korea; but by the time he ordered his November "End the War" UN offensive, 300,000 Chinese troops had already crossed the Yalu into North Korea. When the Chinese forces struck, entire ROK Army and US Army regiments were encircled and decimated. By contrast, the Marines wrote one of the most famous chapters in their history by fighting their way out of a Chinese trap around the Chosin Reservoir and emerging as an intact fighting unit.

This undated photo shows Lieutenant Colonel John L. Hopkins leading men of 1/5 Marines in singing *The Star-Spangled Banner* during a field memorial service to their fallen comrades. Some 4,267 Marines lost their lives in Korea and another 23,744 were wounded. (NARA)

UN forces were driven back out of North Korea before the Chinese offensives were stemmed. As the Communist forces tried to overwhelm the UN's massive firepower with sheer numbers, the war ground down into a World War I-style trench warfare stalemate. Often heavy but generally inconclusive fighting continued until July 27, 1953, when the armistice left Korea still divided along a boundary little changed from the starting point of June 1950.

Personnel of the North Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army in celebratory mood, 1953. Soldiers of both sides were ready for the bloody stalemate to end long before the politicians behind the peace negotiations were. To this day, official DPRK histories celebrate what is known as the Just Fatherland Liberation War as a brilliant and outstanding North Korean victory, with only small passing references to Chinese and Soviet assistance. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

UNIT ORGANIZATIONS

NKPA rifle battalion

The standard NKPA rifle battalion, of which there were three in each regiment, had a strength of approximately 650 officers and men. These personnel were distributed throughout three rifle companies, a heavy-machine-gun company, a mortar company, an antitank-gun platoon, an antitank-rifle platoon, and signal, medical, and supply platoons.

Each individual rifle company had an authorized strength of around 150 men divided into three rifle platoons, one heavy-machine-gun section, and a headquarters element. The headquarters element was composed of the company commander, a first sergeant, a cook, and several medical aid men. Each rifle platoon had a theoretical strength of 45 men divided into four squads. Each squad had one Degtyaryov DP light-machine-gun team and eight riflemen armed with M1891/30 Mosin-Nagant rifles under a squad leader armed with a submachine gun. Heavy machine guns were 7.62mm M1910 Maxims, most commonly using the M1931 "Universal" dual-purpose mount. The company heavy-machine-gun section had a strength of 15 men and was divided into two squads, each equipped with one heavy machine gun. The rifle battalion's 70-man heavy-machine-gun company consisted of three platoons, each composed of three squads with one gun apiece.

The rifle battalion's mortar company was also around 70 strong, again divided into three platoons with three squads each. Each squad had an 82mm M1936 or M1937 medium mortar and the company had a horse-drawn supply cart. The 15-man antitank-gun platoon was composed of an officer and two sections, each equipped with a 45mm antitank gun. The antitank-rifle platoon had an officer and three five-man squads, each squad equipped with with three antitank rifles. The signal platoon of one officer and 15 men was equipped with three field telephones and wire. Officers were armed with 7.62mm Tokarev semiautomatic pistols and the support troops carried 7.62mm M1924/27 Mosin-Nagant carbines.

US Marine Corps rifle battalion

The main component of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, the 5th Marine Regiment, was organized according to the 1949 K-Series Table of Organization, which had separate wartime and peacetime staffing levels. Peacetime staffing meant that the 5th Marine Regiment went to war with only 12 of the 27 rifle platoons it should have had. When the 1st Marine Division finally reached full wartime strength, the three rifle battalions of each infantry regiment were approximately 1,000 men strong and each consisted of three rifle companies, one weapons company, and one headquarters and supply company.

Each rifle company was composed of three rifle platoons, a machine-gun platoon, and a light-mortar section. Each rifle platoon numbered about 45 men divided into three 13-man squads, which were further divided into three four-man fire teams under the squad leader. Weapons included two .30-caliber Browning Automatic Rifles and .30-caliber M1 rifles. A rifle platoon headquarters team included the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, guide, runner, radioman, and corpsman. The machine-gun platoon had two sections divided into two squads with a total of six .30-caliber air-cooled Browning M1919A4 light machine guns. The mortar section had three squads, each with a 60mm M2 mortar. Headquarters and crew-served weapon-squad members carried .30-caliber M1 carbines or .45-caliber M1911A1 pistols.

The rifle battalion weapons company had three heavy-machine-gun platoons, each with six .30-caliber water-cooled Browning M1917A1 heavy machine guns, and a medium-mortar platoon of three sections, each with two 81mm M1 mortars. The headquarters and supply company incorporated the battalion staff, a communications platoon with a message center with runners, a wire (field telephone) section, a radio/visual/air panel section, a motor pool with jeeps and trailers, an attached US Navy medical team, and supporting-arms liaison teams such as forward artillery observers and forward air controllers.

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